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# Map of the Territories

# Allegiances

Pineclan:

Leader: Lionstar- Red tom with green eyes

Deputy: Poppyfoot- Black and silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Medicine Cat(s): Junipertwig- Light gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

Warriors: Alderbush- Brown tom with green eyes

Amberpelt- Ginger and white she-cat with green eyes

Vinetooth- White tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Daisypaw- Energetic white she-cat with green eyes

Bubblenose- Ginger tom with blue eyes

Treesting- Brown tom with blue eyes

Dovefeather- Blue gray she-cat with blue eyes

Wavewash- Blue gray tom with brown eyes

Astertuft- Brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Beetleleg- Black tom with green eyes

Heronlight- Silver tabby she-cat with green eyes

Fawnface- Light brown she-cat with brown eyes

Soilclaw- Black tom with green eyes

Puddlestripe- Gray and black tabby tom with green eyes

Splashpelt- Black and white she-cat with gray eyes

Apprentice: Thymepaw- Small black she-cat with hazel eyes

Cloudrun- Energetic white tom with green eyes

Midnightfur- Black tom with green eyes

Sprigleap- White tom with brown eyes

Mousenose- Dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Apprentice: Stumppaw- Black tom with a long tail and blue eyes

Olivepatch- Dark gray she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Applepaw- Ginger she-cat with green eyes

Frogclaw- Brown and white tom with green eyes

Blazethroat- White tom with a ginger neck and green eyes

Rowanroot- White and ginger tom with white paws and green eyes

Apprentice: Elkpaw- Dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Sunwhisker- Ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Squirreltree- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Goldencurl- Golden she-cat with amber eyes

Lightstep- Reddish brown she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Spotpaw- Ginger tom with one black ear and green eyes

Lilyfoot- Golden she-cat with green eyes

Jayflight- Light gray tabby tom with gray eyes

Turtlefoot- Dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with gray eyes

Ivysprout- Dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with gray eyes

Russettail- Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice: Dustpaw- Black and silver tabby she-cat with dark brown eyes

Sprucesky- Pale gray tom with gray eyes

Burnttail- Light brown she-cat with a black tail and hazel eyes

Apprentice: Leafpaw- Brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Graystream- Gray tom with green eyes

Sootdrift- Dark gray tom with green eyes

Hornetheart- Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Queens: Starlingwing- Black and brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Kit(s): Gladekit- Brown tabby she-kit with green eyes

Slykit- Black tom-kit with dark brown eyes

Shadowkit- Black she-kit with green eyes

Swanfur- White she-cat with brown eyes

Kit(s): Minkkit- Black tom-kit with brown eyes

Strikekit- Black and white spotted tom-kit with green eyes

Stormkit- Dark gray tom-kit with brown eyes

Heatherkit- White and pale gray she-kit with green eyes

Plumeyes- Ginger she-cat with dark blue eyes

Kit(s): Firekit- Ginger tom-kit with gray eyes

Shinekit- Pale ginger she-kit with blue eyes

Acornkit- Dark gray she-kit with gray eyes

Finchkit- Ginger she-kit with blue eyes

Elder(s): Spikefall- Brown tom with white spots and blue eyes

Owlsneeze- Black tom with brown eyes

Needlenose- Dark gray she-cat with gray eyes and pointy nose

Archtooth- White tom with green eyes

Mapleclan:

Leader: Brindlestar- Brindle she-cat with brown eyes

Apprentice: Goldenpaw- Black she-cat with golden eyes

Deputy: Foxrun- Ginger and white tom with green eyes

Medicine Cat(s): Hollytrot- Red she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice: Tiltpaw- Small white tom with a disfigured forepaw and gray eyes

Warriors: Rustnose- Reddish brown she-cat with amber eyes

Dirtpelt- Dark brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Shrewleg- Dark brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Apprentice: Skypaw- White she-cat with green eyes

Salmonlap- Pale ginger she-cat with blue eyes

Rushear- Ginger she-cat with white ears and green eyes

Apprentice: Hollowpaw- Black she-cat with green eyes

Blackleap- Black tom with golden eyes

Nightfur- Black she-cat with gray eyes

Hawkflight- Dark brown tom with golden eyes

Whitepelt- White tom with gray eyes

Apprentice: Robinpaw- Gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Kestrelwing- Dark gray tom with green eyes

Skipbrush- Dark gray tabby tom with brown eyes

Petalface- Dark brown she-cat with a white face and green eyes

Rockfall- Dark gray tom with amber eyes

Pigeonbeak- Gray tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice: Flashpaw- White tom with a dark gray stripe down his back and green eyes

Rookbelly- Light gray tom with a black stomach and brown eyes

Nettleprod- Gray she-cat with green eyes

Prickletooth- Dark gray tabby she-cat with green eyes

Flowerpop- Black she-cat with light blue eyes

Featherlight- Black and gray spotted she-cat with light blue eyes

Talonstrike- Black tom with green eyes

Sedgechin- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Streamclaw- White she-cat with brown eyes

Grasshare- Black and light brown she-cat with green eyes

Bramblethorn- Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Honeypaw- Black she-cat with light brown eyes

Pearleg- Light brown she-cat with one white leg and pale green eyes

Spottedjaw- Brown she-cat with white spots along her muzzle and green eyes

Nettlestick- Dark gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Larkcall- Light brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Queens: Pearpath- Dark brown she-cat with green eyes

Kit(s): Minnowkit- Light gray she-kit with green eyes

Mallowkit- Gray and black she-kit with green eyes

Briarkit- Dark brown she-kit with brown eyes

Moonglow- Pale gray she-cat with light blue eyes

Kit(s): Quailkit- Gray she-kit with amber eyes

Dapplekit- White and brown dappled she-kit with blue eyes

Bumblekit- Dark gray tom-kit with light gray stripes and light blue eyes

Reedkit- Dark brown tom-kit with amber eyes

Rainkit- Dark gray tom-kit with amber eyes

Webkit- Dark gray, almost black tom-kit with amber eyes

Elder(s): Quieteyes- Brindle she-cat with light blue eyes

Oakclan:

Leader: Cloverstar- White she-cat with piercing green eyes

(Temporarily led by the deputy, Dewcreek while Cloverstar is in the nursery)

Deputy: Dewcreek- Light gray she-cat with green eyes

(Temporarily filled by Newteye as Dewcreek leads the clan)

Medicine Cat(s): Rabbitfoot- Light brown tom with brown eyes

Apprentice: Tallpaw- White tom with green eyes

Warriors: Crowflight- Black tom with green eyes

Lakenose- Gray and white she-cat with green eyes

Yellowfur- Yellow tom with amber eyes

Beewing- Yellow she-cat with dark brown eyes

Marshpelt- Dark gray she-cat with blue eyes

Breezeleg- Light gray she-cat with one white leg and green eyes

Nutpelt- Light brown she-cat with brown eyes

Darkfall- Dark brown tom with amber eyes

Ambersight- Brown and white she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice: Boulderpaw- Gray tom with amber eyes

Triwing- Calico she-cat with green eyes

Nuzzletail- Affectionate brown tom with green eyes

Stemrise- Brown and white tom with green eyes

Furzeshine- Calico she-cat with blue eyes

Spotpelt- Calico she-cat with green eyes

Newteye- Brown tom with green eyes

Willowswish- Gray and white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Mumblepaw- Quiet yellow tom with green eyes

Twigglow- Brown she-cat with green eyes

Mudfrog- Dark brown tom with green eyes

Ashthroat- Gray tom with amber eyes

Badgeryowl- Black and white tom with blue eyes

Weaseltail- Black she-cat with a white tail and green eyes

Meadowbug- White she-cat with blue eyes

Skystretch- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Larkwing- Light gray tom with gray eyes

Queen(s): Cloverstar- White she-cat with piercing green eyes

Kits: Chirpkit- Talkative white she-kit with green eyes

Hopkit- Brown and white tom-kit with blue eyes

Herbkit- White tom-kit with green eyes

Mintkit- White she-kit with green eyes

Quicksnow- Quick white she-cat with green eyes

Kit(s): Birchkit- Light gray and white striped tom-kit with gray eyes

Mosskit- Light gray she-kit with green eyes

Elder(s): Smallbranch- Small brown tom with brown eyes

Tanglefur- Brown, curly-furred she-cat with green eyes

Thundergrowl- White and gray tom with gray eyes

Beechclan:

Leader: Aspenstar- Light brown tom with blue eyes

Deputy: Archpelt- Dark brown tom with golden eyes

Apprentice: Frostpaw- White tom with light blue eyes

Medicine Cat(s): Robinclaw- Brown she-cat with blue eyes

Warriors: Grayfeather- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice: Darkpaw- Dark brown tom with blue eyes

Flowerleap- Black and white she-cat with light blue eyes

Lichenfur- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Daisyeyes- Black she-cat with golden eyes

Apprentice: Waterpaw- Gray she-cat with blue eyes

Skunkpelt- Black and white she-cat with blue eyes

Tinyleg- Small black she-cat with blue eyes

Lakebreath- White tom with blue eyes

Owlrace- White and brown tom with yellow

Molebelly- White tom with a brown belly and brown eyes

Oatheart- White tom with brown eyes

Rockclaw- Black tom with yellow eyes

Weaselslip- Ginger and white she-cat with brown eyes

Copperears- White she-cat with ginger ears and blue eyes

Apprentice: Hootpaw- Black tom with yellow eyes

Gorsetoe- Black tom with one ginger paw and yellow eyes

Snailfall- Big ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Bluestreak- Blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Ratsneak- Gray tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Bouncepaw- Black she-cat with blue eyes

Crickethop- Blue-gray she-cat with amber eyes

Queen(s): Mistyface- Ginger she-cat with a white face and blue eyes

Kit(s): Wildkit- Black she-kit with blue eyes

Stormkit- Black tom-kit with yellow eyes

Snakekit- Ginger tom-kit with yellow eyes

Troutswim- Light gray she-cat with blue eyes

Kit(s): Birdkit- Light gray she-kit with blue eyes

Shadekit- Dark gray she-kit with blue eyes

Nightkit- Dark gray tom-kit with blue eyes

Moonkit- Silver she-kit with blue eyes

Hollowkit- Brown tom-kit with blue eyes

Elder(s): Pondsnap- White tom with blue eyes

Alderclan:

Leader: Tulipstar- Black she-cat with ginger legs and green eyes

Deputy: Moletail- Brown she-cat with a black tail and brown eyes

Medicine Cat(s): Splotchpelt- Gray tom with white splotches and brown eyes

Warriors: Voletunnel- Dark brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice: Onepaw- Light brown tom with green eyes and was born with only one ear

Galefur- Light gray she-cat with messy fur and brown eyes

Flyface- Gray tom with a black face and amber eyes

Kindheart- White she-cat with hazel eyes

Stripenose- Ginger tabby tom with green eyes

Skunkspot- Black and white spotted she-cat with blue eyes

Scratchfoot- Ginger tom with a black stripe on his foot and blue eyes

Cowfur- Black and white she-cat with green eyes

Frozenpaw- White she-cat with blue eyes

Shadedpurr- Gentle black tom with green eyes

Windleap- Light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Kinktail- Light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Baysnout- White she-cat with gray nose and blue eyes

Hazeleyes- Tortoiseshell and white she-cat with hazel eyes

Apprentice: Loudpaw- Rambuctious brown tabby tom with brown eyes

Forestglow- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Snowgleam- White tom with hazel eyes

Tufthead- White tom with tufted head fur and amber eyes

Purplepetal- Dark gray she-cat with violet eyes

Riftfur- Dark gray tom with dark blue eyes

Twigloop- Light brown tom with a curled tail and green eyes

Leafgaze- White tom with green eyes

Harerun- Dark brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Runningfur- Light brown tom with green eyes

Queen(s):

Elder(s): Sneezefur- Black tom with blue eyes

Beet- Former loner tom with a brown and white pelt and blind blue eyes

# Prologue

The nearly full moon floated out from behind a cloud and lit up the forest. The pine trees stretched up towards the sky, and the tops disappeared into the darkness. Lavender shivered as the cold of leaf-fall crept into her fur. She looked up at her mother; her silver fur shined in the moonlight as she carried Lavender.

"Mother, where are we going?" Lavender mewed quietly.

"Be patient dear, we're almost there. We're going to find someone who can fix my injury".

Her gentle voice comforted Lavender, and her eyes began to flutter shut. It was late, and she was exhausted. Maybe she'd sleep for a few moments. The warm scent of her mother swirled around her, and the slow sway of walking was putting her to sleep. She bounced up and down occasionally as her mother limped on her injured hind leg. Lavender had been too young to remember how the injury happened, but her and her mother had traveled slowly for moons afterwards to find someone who could fix it. Her mother always talked about a group of cats who had a healer that would be able to fix her leg; now, they were almost there, and Lavender was excited. It had been a long journey since her mother had to move very slowly because of her injury, and they had to stop frequently to rest.

Suddenly there was a loud rustle in the bushes next to them, and Lavender felt her mother freeze. She felt her mother shoving her underneath a prickly bush, and grunted in discomfort. Her eyes slowly opened and she peered into the darkness. The kit spotted her mother standing in front of the bramble bush Lavender was under. Another rustled sounded from the undergrowth, and her mother turned to face it, a low growl sounding in her throat. A foul scent hit Lavender's nose, and she wrinkled it in disgust.

"What's that smell?" She squeaked.

"Hush!" Her mother mewed urgently.

Lavender hesitated. Why was her mother acting so scared? The she-kit was about to crawl out from underneath the bush when a flash of orange fur came flying out of the bushes. It threw itself on top of Lavender's mother, and the silver she-cat let out a shriek of pain. Lavender scooted as far back as she could into the brambles and watched in terror.

Lavender could hear her mother and the orange creature fighting, and it sounded like her mother was losing. Her mother's screech was cut off abruptly, and the orange creature shook itself off. Its long snout was dripping with blood, and it turned its gleaming eyes towards the brambles.

The silver she-kit whimpered in fear, pushing herself back into the brambles. The orange creature crept towards her, letting out a low growl. Suddenly her mother staggered to her paws and leapt onto the creature's back. The two began rolling around once more, locked in each other's jaws. The fighting animals fell onto the brambles that Lavender was hiding in.

The kit felt the bush closing around her, and the two creatures tussled on top of her. A flailing paw hit Lavender, and she fell to the ground, smacking her head against it in the process. She wailed as she grew dizzy, and darkness rushed in around her. The fighting noises grew fainter, until she couldn't hear or see anything; there was just darkness.

# Chapter 1

Daisypaw grumbled as she felt a paw shaking her awake. She opened her eyes to see her mentor, Vinetooth, glaring down at her. Alarm spiked through her pelt as she realized that they were supposed to be on the dawn patrol, and it was already getting light outside.

She quickly scrambled to her paws and faced her mentor. "I'm sorry, I slept too long! I didn't sleep well last night and I thought I heard weird noises coming from the forest..."

"It's fine," Vinetooth cut her off. "But we need to hurry up if we want to join the patrol".

The apprentice quickly followed her mentor out of her den, and saw the other cats on the patrol waiting. Goldencurl stood up from where she was crouching, and Alderbush let out an exasperated sigh.

"Finally!" He fluffed out his fur. "Can we get moving now? I'm freezing my tail off".

Daisypaw rolled her eyes as the four cats trotted towards the entrance to Pineclan's camp. Alderbush had been trying to push everyone around since his brother, Lionstar, had become leader of Pineclan. Lionstar's mate, Goldencurl, was also on the patrol, but she never tried to act superior. The apprentice shook out her white fur and tried to focus on the patrol. She was the last to squeeze through the log tunnel that separated the camp and the forest, and followed the warriors toward the border with Oakclan.

As they walked, Daisypaw began to smell a foul smell she'd never encountered before. She stopped abruptly and tasted the air. Her mentor turned around and faced her.

"What're you doing?" Vinetooth asked, annoyed.

"Don't you smell that?"

"Smell what?" He trotted back to Daisypaw's side and called the rest of the patrol back.

The three warriors sniffed the air, and all smelled it immediately. They began to shift uncomfortably, and their gazes darted around the forest.

"A fox was here recently, and it smells like it was stalking a cat. I don't think it was a clan cat". Goldencurl mewed, shifting her paws nervously.

Alderbush nodded. "We should go check it out".

The patrol followed the scent towards the edge of clan territory. The scent went beyond the border into unmarked territory, and the patrol hesitated at the edge of it.

"Should we follow it past? There could be a hurt cat out there". Goldencurl mewed tentatively.

Alderbush shook his head. "No, it's beyond clan territory. We'll report it to Lionstar and he can decide what to do from there. For now let's just mark the borders and return to camp".

For once, Daisypaw agreed with Alderbush, and followed the patrol back towards the other border with a sigh of relief. When they reached it, the cats marked the border and headed towards the one they shared with Mapleclan.

When the patrol returned to camp, the sun was well over the horizon and the clan was awake. Lionstar was helping his deputy, Poppyfoot, organize patrols for the day. Daisypaw followed her mentor and the other warriors as they approached him, and waited for him to finish the patrols.

Poppyfoot scanned the clan cats. "Midnightfur, will you lead a hunting patrol by the river?"

The black tom hesitated, then nodded. "Of course, who should I bring?"

Daisypaw understood his hesitation. Midnightfur's mate, Starlingwing, had just had three kits, and one of them wasn't doing well. It hadn't been breathing when it was born, and the medicine cat, Junipertwig, had to work hard to revive it. The kit was still struggling, and the approaching leaf-bare wasn't helping. Daisypaw felt a wave of sympathy for the black tom. He was her father's littermate, after all; they were kin.

Poppyfoot thought for a moment. "You can take Splashpelt, Thymepaw, Frogclaw, and Squirreltree".

As the rest of the patrol joined Midnightfur, Poppyfoot nodded in satisfaction. "Three hunting patrols and two border patrols, that should be enough for this morning. I'll send out a few more hunting patrols later since prey is growing sparse".

Lionstar nodded his agreement, then noticed the waiting dawn patrol. He beckoned them forward, and noticed the worried looks in their eyes. "Did you find something on patrol?"

Alderbush stepped forward. "We followed the scent of fox and cat to the edge of clan territory, but decided not to stray beyond the border. Should a patrol be sent to investigate?"

The leader thought for a moment, then nodded, his green eyes flashing in the early morning light. "We should see if the cat is still alive, it's our duty as warriors. You may follow the scent beyond the border, but I don't want any apprentices going". His gaze flitted towards Daisypaw.

The young cat's tail drooped; she'd known he was going to say that. Since her mentor was going on the patrol, she'd probably end up spending most of the day cleaning out the elders' den instead of training. She sighed, "Yes, Lionstar".

Her mentor noticed her disappointment, and turned towards Lionstar. "Could I stay behind as well? I don't want Daisypaw to fall behind in her training. We're learning important battle moves

today".

"Very well, Vinetooth. I'll find another warrior to accompany the patrol". Lionstar glanced around at the available warriors. "Turtlefoot, come over here".

The dilute tortoiseshell trotted over, her head tilted to the side. "Do you need me Lionstar?"

"The dawn patrol followed the smell of cat and fox to the edge of clan territory, and I'd like you to accompany them to investigate. Are you up for it?"

Turtlefoot nodded. "Of course Lionstar".

The reddish brown tom dipped his head to the patrol and headed out the log entrance. Daisypaw wondered where he was going, but she quickly brushed it off. Leaders were allowed to leave camp without being questioned.

"Alright, who should we train with today?" Vinetooth glanced around the camp at the remaining apprentices.

Vinetooth caught sight of his brother, Bubblenose's, kits. Stumpaw, Applepaw, Spotpaw, and Dustpaw were playing moss ball with Daisypaw's sister, Swanfur's, kits. Swanfur was Daisypaw's older sister from a different litter. Daisypaw stared at the kits lovingly; they were so tiny. She couldn't wait to be a warrior and have kits of her own.

Vintooth's voice broke into her thoughts. "I know Stumppaw has been working on some more advanced battle moves as well lately. I'll ask his mentor if they'd like to train with us".

The white tom trotted over to Stumppaw's mentor, Mousenose, who was picking out a piece of prey. The two talked for a second, and Mousenose nodded eagerly. Vinetooth walked back to Daisypaw as the other warrior settled down with his food.

"He agreed that you two should train together; we'll leave after everyone has eaten. You should grab some prey as well, it's going to be a tough day of training. Your assessment could be any day now,

and I want you to be well-prepared. We'll probably train all day". Vinetooth led Daisypaw back to the prey pile.

The apprentice selected a small mouse. Her appetite had faded the moment Vinetooth had mentioned her assessment. She was nervous for it, and was worried she wouldn't do well enough to become a warrior. *What if I'm apprenticed after my littermates?*

Swanfur had been watching her kits play with the apprentices, and noticed Daisypaw picking at her mouse. The white queen trotted over, her brown eyes glistening with worry.

"Is something wrong?" She mewed quietly.

Daisypaw shook her head. "Nothing really. I'm just worried about my assessment".

Swanfur's eyes grew warm, and she nodded in understanding. "When I was an apprentice, I was really worried about my assessment too. You were actually born on the day of my assessment, right before I left. I was so distracted during it that I thought I'd done horribly, but my mentor congratulated me at the end and told me I was becoming a warrior. It's normal to be nervous, you just have to remember that you're better than you think".

Daisypaw suddenly felt more confident, and lifted her gaze to meet Swanfur's. "Thank you, I feel so much better now".

Her sister purred and gently licked her ear. "Now eat your mouse, you can't train on an empty stomach".

The apprentice suddenly had an appetite, and gulped down her mouse. She was licking her whiskers clean when he mentor walked up beside her. "Are you ready? We're leaving soon".

Nodding, Daisypaw jumped to her paws and followed her mentor out of camp. Mousenose and Stumppaw followed them through the log tunnel into the forest. Daisypaw's excitement grew as they got closer to the training area. Her white paws pricked with excitement as they walked through the forest. She would train extra hard today

so that she could do her assessment as soon as possible. Glancing at Stumppaw, she wondered if he was as excited as her. Him and his littermates were set to be assessed around the same time as her and her littermates.

Stumppaw glanced up and caught Daisypaw staring at him. Her pelt flushed hot as he met her gaze and let out a little purr. She quickly snapped her head forward, staring at the ground in front of her. *Does Stumppaw think I like him now? Do I like him? Does he like me?* She was so distracted that she barely noticed the training area coming up until her mentor stopped walking. Daisypaw bumped into him, and he turned around to give her annoyed look. She blinked an apology and stared at her paws sheepishly.

Stumppaw made his way into the shallow dip in the ground followed by his mentor. The apprentice's black fur gleamed in the sunlight as he leaped over the little pond on the edge of the hollow with a yowl. His mentor padded around the pond, shaking his tabby head at the rambunctious apprentice.

Vinetooth followed Mousenose around the lake, and Daisypaw hesitated. She wanted to look mature in front of her mentor, like a warrior, but she also wanted to impress Stumppaw. *What should I do?*

Shaking out her pelt, she quickly walked around the pond. *Being a warrior is more important than impressing some tom. He probably doesn't even like me anyway. I'm not even sure that I like him.* Her mentor nodded in approval as she padded to his side, and Daisypaw's tail curled with happiness; she had made the right decision.

"Alright Daisypaw, I want you to hide in the bushes and pretend to be an invader. As soon as Stumppaw walks close enough to you, pounce on him". Vinetooth nudged her towards the edge of the hollow.

The white apprentice nodded and quickly slipped into the bushes. She watched as Mousenose whispered instructions to Stumppaw. His eyes gleamed and he whispered a response before padding towards the edge of the bushes. Daisypaw bunched her hind legs

and prepared to pounce.

As soon as Stumppaw was close enough, she leapt out of the bushes and bowled him over. Daisypaw quickly pinned him to the ground and let out a triumphant yowl. Stumppaw went limp and Daisypaw loosened her grip on him. *Wow, he gave up easily.* She thought to herself with pride. Suddenly Stumppaw slipped out of her grasp, quick as a fox. He whipped around and leaped on Daisypaw's back, forcing her onto the ground. She gasped in shock, struggling for a second, before realizing that he had her pinned too well.

"Well done!" Mousenose ran up, his gaze bright. "You executed the move perfectly Stumppaw".

The black apprentice stepped off of Daisypaw, his head raised high. "Thanks Mousenose".

Daisypaw's mentor padded up, his eyes brimming with amusement. "That, Daisypaw, is why it's important not to get cocky when fighting an opponent. You never know what tricks they have".

Daisypaw purred in amusement, shaking dust out of her white pelt. "That took me completely by surprise! I thought you'd given up because I'm too strong for you". She teased Stumppaw.

"Oh you are too strong for me. I think you broke my paw". Stumppaw whimpered playfully, lifting one paw.

The apprentices both purred in amusement before turning their attention to their mentors. Mousenose turned to Stumppaw.

"Now I want you to pretend to be an intruder, and Daisypaw, you execute the battle move. It may be a little more difficult to do since Stumppaw knows what you're doing. He had the element of surprise, which you don't have now".

Vinetooth nodded. "I still want you to try your best though. He may instinctively loosen his grip and give you just enough room to do it. If not, we can try later without letting Stumppaw know".

Daisypaw nodded, and watched as Stumppaw slid into the bushes. She was about to walk towards him when Vinetooth stopped her.

He leaned closer to her ear and whispered, "Instead of slipping out from under him like he did to you, I want you to push your hind legs into his belly the second he loosens his grip. Then jump up and pin him".

She quickly agreed, and made her way towards the bushes. When she was close, she heard the bushes rustle, and Stumppaw flew out of them and onto her back. He wrestled her to the ground and pinned her quickly. She pretended to struggle for a bit, then fell limp. Like Vinetooth had said, she felt Stumppaw instinctively loosen his grip, ever so slightly. Before he realized that he'd done so, Daisypaw quickly slammed her hind legs into his stomach and sent him flying. She leapt back onto her paws and pinned him while he was still winded.

She stepped off of him, purring in satisfaction. Her mentor strode over to her side, his eyes glimmering with approval. "Great job! You were still able to do the move, even without the element of surprise".

Mousenose dipped his head at her. "That was pretty skilled for an apprentice".

Daisypaw felt warm from their praise, and felt like she could do any battle move. She quickly turned to her mentor. "What's next?" She asked excitedly.

Vinetooth gave her more battles move to perform, and they trained until Daisypaw was exhausted. She could tell Stumppaw was tired too, and his stomach was growling with hunger. Their mentors nodded, satisfied.

"That's enough training for today". Mousenose informed them. "We can head back to camp now".

Vinetooth stared at Daisypaw thoughtfully. "When we get back to camp, I'm going to talk to your littermates' mentors and Lionstar".

"Why?" Daisypaw asked quizzically.

"I think it's time for your assessment".

# Chapter 2

Turtlefoot followed the patrol through the forest as they headed towards the edge of clan territory. She was glad to be out of camp today. Her and her mate, Rowanroot, had fought last night, and she was dreading being in camp with him. He had asked her to have kits with him, but she wasn't ready for that. She was a new warrior, and she didn't want to give that up to be a queen quite yet. She wasn't sure if she ever wanted to give that up.

The head of the patrol, Alderbush, stopped abruptly. "I found the scent trail, let's follow it".

Turtlefoot tasted the air, smelling fox and cat scent mixed together. The tortoiseshell she-cat shuttered; she couldn't imagine what they were going to find at the end of the trail. The poor cat had probably been stalked by the fox, and then attacked and killed. She couldn't help wondering what the cat had been doing on clan territory in the first place, but she brushed it off. It didn't matter now.

As they walked, she noticed Goldencurl tasting the air inquisitively. "There's another scent mixed with fox and cat, but I can't quite make it out. It's similar to cat scent, but smells a little different".

The patrol paused, all three cats tasting the air. Suddenly, Turtlefoot realized what the scent was, and her fur stood on end. "It's kit scent. The cat had a kit with her! Hurry, we have to see if we can find them!"

She raced through the pine forest, following the scent trail with the rest of the patrol close behind her. Reaching the edge of the border, she hesitated. She'd never been outside of clan territory before, and didn't know what dangers lay beyond it.

As she hesitated, the rest of the patrol raced past her, following the scent. Turtlefoot shook off her fear and ran after them, catching up when they paused. The cats tasted the air, sniffing nearby bushes and trees.

"The scent is strongest here, and is mixed with fear scent". Goldencurl noted. "This must be where it attacked".

"Search the area, see if the cat or kit are around". Alderbush ordered, heading towards some nearby trees.

Turtlefoot nodded, heading towards a group of bushes. The first few bushes didn't have much scent on them, and Turtlefoot moved on to the others. A large group of them were crushed, like the fighting animals had fallen onto them. The scent of kit, cat, and fox were all stronger here, but especially the kit scent. The tortoiseshell she-cat cringed, not wanting to look any further. What if this was where the kit had been killed?

Before she could look further, she heard a call from Goldencurl. "I found the cat". She mewed sorrowfully.

Turtlefoot knew by the sound of her mew that the news wasn't good; the cat must have been killed by the fox. She turned her attention back to the bushes, hoping that the kit was still alive. Her hopes weren't very high, but she should look anyway. Nosing through the bushes, she got a fresh whiff of kit scent. Further into the bushes, she spotted a tiny silver tail on the ground. Turtlefoot quickly cleared the rest of the bushes and saw a tiny silver kit lying on its side. Hanging her head, the warrior realized that the kit must be dead. She turned around, heading towards the rest of the patrol to tell them the grave news.

Suddenly, she heard the kit take a deep, gasping breath. Turtlefoot whipped around and raced back to the kit, picking it up gently. It was a tiny she-kit, no older than three moons. There was a large cut on her head, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. The tortoiseshell warrior quickly returned to the rest of the patrol. The other warriors turned around, their faces shocked as they spotted the kit.

"Is it alive?" Alderbush asked worriedly.

"Yes, she's breathing, but I can't wake her up. She has a cut on her head".

Alderbush nodded. "We have to get her back to our medicine cat immediately". He turned and raced back towards clan territory.

Goldencurl and Turtlefoot followed close behind him. Turtlefoot was careful not to jostle the kit, and held her as still as she could while she ran. She willed the kit to stay alive until they reached the camp, where their medicine cat, Junipertwig, could help her.

They reached the Pineclan camp, and Turtlefoot squeezed through the log entrance behind the rest of the patrol. When she was through, she saw Goldencurl and Alderbush urgently talking to Lionstar. Without waiting for them, Turtlefoot raced over to Junipertwig's den. When she entered, she noticed Starlingwing curled around her ill kit, Shadowkit. Both cats were fast asleep in a nest. The kit seemed to be breathing easier, and Starlingwing looked more relaxed; Shadowkit must be healing.

Turtlefoot found Junipertwig in her herb store, which was a group of small ledges in the back of the cave piled high with herbs. The gray and white she-cat turned around, her blue eyes widening when she saw the kit.

"Quick, put her in this nest". The medicine cat quickly led Turtlefoot to a fresh nest, where she gently set the kit down. "What happened? Where did she come from?"

"We followed the smell of cat, kit, and fox past clan territory, and found her in some bushes. We found her mother, too, but she had been killed by the fox. The kit is breathing, but I couldn't wake her and she has a large gash on her head". Turtlefoot explained breathlessly.

Junipertwig nodded. "Alright, I need to make a poultice for the wound first. Will you fetch me some Marigold, Goldenrod, and Horsetail? Also some cobwebs to keep the poultice from rubbing off. I'll tell you what the herbs look like once you're at the herb store".

Turtlefoot quickly made her way back to the herb store, and called back to Junipertwig. "Alright, I'm here. What was the first herb?"

"Marigold. It's a yellowish-orange flower with short stems".

Turtlefoot sorted through the herbs, finding some Marigold flowers. "I found some!"

"Good," Junipertwig called back. "Bring me a few of those flowers. Next, find Goldenrod. They're bright yellow flowers with long stems".

Searching through the herbs, Turtlefoot found one slightly shriveled Goldenrod flower. "I only found one, and it looks a bit old".

Turtlefoot heard Junipertwig sigh. "That's what I was afraid of. I'll need to travel to Beechclan for more. Bring it anyway!"

"Okay, what's next?"

"Horsetail. It's long and has bristly stems".

Turtlefoot found plenty of Horsetail, and gathered a few stocks of it. She quickly wrapped some cobweb around one of her paws and hopped back to Junipertwig with the herbs in her mouth. She set the herbs next to the medicine cat and shook the cobweb off next to them.

"Thank you Turtlefoot. I've examined the kit and believe she's in shock. She may take awhile to wake up because of this, but she should be okay when she does. Once this wound has healed, she'll be good as new".

Turtlefoot watched nervously as Junipertwig chewed all of the herbs into a poultice. *What if she's wrong?* Turtlefoot thought to herself. *What if she wasn't okay once she woke up? What if she never woke up?*

The medicine cat rubbed the poultice onto the kit's head and gingerly wrapped cobweb around it. "There, that should prevent infection and help it heal quicker. Will you fetch me some Thyme as well? It will help with her shock without putting her into a deeper sleep like poppy seeds".

The tortoiseshell warrior nodded and headed back to the herb store.

"What does Thyme look like?"

"They're small leaves with a tangy scent. They're a bit sticky, so you may want to grab a beech leaf to carry them on. Do you know what a beech leaf looks like?"

"Yes, I've seen beech leaves before". Turtlefoot looked around for the large leaf and quickly found one.

She then nosed through the herbs to find some Thyme, and found a small pile on a lower ledge. She scooped some onto the beech leaf and carried it back to Junipertwig. The medicine cat was licking the small kit's fur the wrong way, and she looked up as Turtlefoot approached.

"She's cold from the shock, so I'm doing this to warm her up. It may help her wake up quicker too". The gray and white she-cat explained.

Turtlefoot nodded and set the Thyme by the medicine cat's feet. "Here you go, do you need anything else?"

"No, that'll be all. I'm going to chew the thyme up and try to get her to swallow some". Junipertwig crouched and chewed the Thyme into a pulp. She gently pried open the she-kit's mouth and dribbled some juice inside. Junipertwig gently massaged the kit's throat, and she instinctively swallowed.

"Good," Turtlefoot purred. "Now she'll recover from the shock quicker?"

"Hopefully," Junipertwig nodded. "All we can do is wait now. I'll keep a close eye on her if you want to leave".

Turtlefoot hesitated. She hadn't noticed if Rowanroot was in camp or not, and she didn't want to find out. If he was out there, she knew their fight would resume. Still, Turtlefoot began to walk towards the entrance; he might be training with his apprentice, Elkpaw, anyway.

Slowly poking her head out, Turtlefoot quickly scanned the camp. She couldn't see her mate's ginger fur anywhere, or his apprentice's

dark brown fur. With a sigh of relief, she padded into the clearing. As she was heading towards the fresh-kill pile, Lionstar walked out of his den. He spotted Turtlefoot and called her over.

The tortoiseshell she-cat sighed; she'd have to eat later. Her stomach growled loudly as she trotted over to her leader. *Why am I so hungry?* She wondered to herself. She'd eaten earlier, and usually she didn't eat until much later. Brushing it off, she figured it was just from all the excitement and action she'd encountered that day.

Turtlefoot reached her leader and dipped her head to him. "What can I help you with, Lionstar?"

"I wanted to check in with you and see how the kit is doing". He mewed.

"She hasn't woken up yet, but Junipertwig says that's likely from the shock. Once it wears off, she should wake up. The cut on her head isn't too bad either, and Junipertwig put a poultice on it. She should make a full recovery". Turtlefoot explained to the leader.

"Great, then we can figure out what to do with her".

"Wait, you're not going to let her stay?" Turtlefoot asked in surprise.

Lionstar sighed. "I don't know. We already have so many kits in the clan. My sister has a litter of four, Swanfur has four kits, and Starlingwing and Midnightfur just had three kits last night. With Leaf-bare coming, I don't know if we can accept another mouth to feed".

Turtlefoot nodded understandingly. "It is a difficult time to have kits in the clan. What do you think will happen to her if she doesn't stay?"

"The full moon is tonight, I can ask the other leaders if their clans will take her. You'll come tonight, I'll see you when the sun sets". He dipped his head to the tortoiseshell she-cat and padded towards the camp entrance. He slipped through the log and disappeared.

He had been going into the forest so much lately that Turtlefoot

was growing suspicious. It seemed like all of his free time was spent outside of camp. She couldn't help but wonder why. Just then, the log moved and Rowanroot and Elkpaw padded into the camp. Gasping, Turtlefoot quickly slipped into the dirt-place tunnel and raced into the forest. She stopped, gulping in air. *That was a close one.*

Turtlefoot caught the scent of Lionstar heading toward the border they shared with Mapleclan. The young warrior decided to follow him, just so she could ease her suspicions. He was a leader; there was no way he was doing anything against the warrior code. Still, Turtlefoot wanted to reassure herself, so she followed his scent trail.

As she got closer to the Mapleclan border, an uneasy feeling began to grow in her stomach. Had he crossed the border? When she reached the scent markers, dread dragged at her paws. His scent line continued over the border.

The tortoiseshell she-cat held out hope. Maybe he had just gone to talk with Brindlestar about taking the kit. But why wouldn't he just wait until the gathering? Turtlefoot's suspicions grew, and she had an awful feeling that he was doing something against the warrior code. She paced up and down the border, wondering if she should follow him onto Mapleclan territory.

If she was going to follow him, she'd need an excuse in case she got caught. She could always say she was coming to warn them about the fox, and that she thought the scent trail had led towards their territory.

Gathering all of her courage, Turtlefoot stepped over the border and continued to follow the scent trail. She followed it deep into Mapleclan territory until she reached a small pond. The leader's smell disappeared, as if he'd walked through the water. Disappointed, Turtlefoot was about to turn around and head back when she heard voices coming from some nearby bushes.

She quietly crept through the undergrowth, careful not to make any noise. As she reached the bushes, she could make out Lionstar's voice. He was whispering quietly, as if he didn't want to be heard.

*Who is he talking to?*

Turtlefoot stiffened as she heard another voice coming from the bushes. The scent coming from the bushes was definitely Mapleclan, but Turtlefoot didn't recognize the voice. It was a she-cat, but not one she had met.

*I have to know what they're saying.* Turtlefoot silently crept forward until she was directly behind the bushes. She could hear their voices more clearly, and listened intently.

"Are you sure no one suspects anything?" The she-cat whispered worriedly.

"I'm the leader, I'm allowed to leave camp when I wish. Why would anyone suspect anything?" Lionstar replied confidently.

"Leaders usually don't leave camp this much". The she-cat murmured.

"Don't worry, no one will find out about us". Lionstar purred gently.

Turtlefoot's jaw dropped open in shock. Lionstar couldn't be mates with a Mapleclan cat; it was against the warrior code! What about his mate, Goldencurl, and their kits? *Should I tell someone?* Turtlefoot wondered.

"There's actually a reason I wanted to meet". The she-cat mewed tentatively.

Turtlefoot froze. What was the she-cat going to tell him? Was she going to ask him to switch clans for her?

Lionstar shifted uncomfortably. "What is it?"

The she-cat sighed. "I'm expecting kits".

# Chapter 3

Starlingwing blinked open her eyes to see the sun setting outside of the medicine cat's den. *We slept all day!* She glanced down at her sleeping kit, sighing in relief. Her breathing had eased, and she was sleeping soundly.

The queen looked up to see Junipertwig approaching her. "Her breathing has gotten better!" She exclaimed excitedly.

Junipertwig nodded. "I'd like to keep her overnight, but she should be good to return to the nursery tomorrow. You should return tonight though, your other kits need you".

Starlingwing leapt to her feet in shock. "I haven't fed them all day. They must be starving!"

Junipertwig placed her tail soothingly over the queen's shoulders. "Don't worry, Midnightfur brought them in to suckle throughout the day. You just didn't wake up".

"Oh thank goodness". The tabby she-cat sighed in relief.

Starlingwing stared at Shadowkit, still sleeping peacefully in her nest. She hated leaving her, but she knew her other kits would be missing her. Her heart ached, realizing how much she missed them as well.

"I should go check on them". She hesitated, looking at her sleeping kit. "Do you think she'll be okay?"

"She'll be fine, don't worry. I might place her in the same nest as the other kit so they'll both stay warm".

Starlingwing paused, confused. "What other kit? Are one of Plumeyes' kits sick? Or Swanfur's?"

Junipertwig shook her head. "No, they're all just fine. The dawn

patrol found this kit just off of our territory. Her mother had been killed by a fox, and she was injured, so they brought her here. She's been unconscious since they found her due to shock and her head wound, but I'm sure she'll wake up soon. Once the poultice works its magic on the wound, she'll be good as new".

Starlingwing padded over to the silver kit's nest, peeking into it curiously. "What will you tell her about her mother when she wakes up?"

"I don't know. She probably doesn't know what Starclan is, so I can't tell her she went to live in the stars. I'll just have to tell her the truth".

Starlingwing nodded. "It'll be hard, but that's the best way to do it".

Suddenly the tiny she-kit stirred, parting her jaws in a large yawn. Her gray eyes blinked open, peering at the watching cats in confusion. Starlingwing's eyes met her's, and she felt a spark in her heart, the same feeling she'd felt when she'd stared at her kits for the first time. Starlingwing knew immediately that fate had brought this kit to her, and she was meant to raise her as her own.

The kit sat up slowly, staring at the she-cats. "Where am I?" Her gaze landed on Starlingwing. "Mother?"

Starlingwing and Junipertwig exchanged shocked glances. Junipertwig gently examined the kit. "Do you remember what happened?"

The kit shook her head. "I don't remember anything. What's happening?"

"Do you remember where you live? Do you remember your mother?" Junipertwig asked gently.

Again, the kit shook her head. "I don't live here? Is that my mother?" She looked at Starlingwing.

Starlingwing hesitated. "I'm not your mother, and you don't live here". The kit's crestfallen look broke Starlingwing's heart, so she quickly carried on talking. "You could live here though! We just

have to talk to our leader first".

Junipertwig shot her a warning look, but the tabby queen ignored her. The kit's eyes lit up at first, but then clouded with confusion once more. "If I don't live here, where did I come from? And who is my mother?"

Starlingwing glanced at the medicine cat, whose blue eyes were clouded with concern. She took a deep breath, slowly sitting down next to the kit. "It's a long story, would you like to hear it?"

The silver kit nodded, her gray eyes glowing with excitement. "Yes please, tell me a story".

Starlingwing watched as Junipertwig explained the story of the fox, her mother, the head wound, and how she got here. The kit's face fell when she heard of her mother, and she wailed quietly. "If I have no mother, who will take care of me?"

Starlingwing's heart ached at the sadness in the kit's eyes, and she blurted out, "I can take care of you, I'll raise you with my own kits".

The kit's tail shot up in excitement. "Oh thank you!"

Junipertwig quickly pushed Starlingwing out of earshot. "What are you doing? I've been hearing rumors that Lionstar won't let her stay. What will happen when you tell him you're going to raise her?"

The tabby queen shrugged. "I'll tell him that we can't send a poor kit out on her own; she'll die if she has to fend for herself".

The medicine cat glanced around her den nervously. "You better go tell him yourself then, before any other cat finds out and tells him".

Starlingwing nodded. She knew the medicine cat was right, and she shouldn't have made this decision without consulting her leader. But she'd felt a connection with the kit, and she couldn't just ignore that. She was about to leave the den when she stopped, wondering what to call the kit.

She turned around to face the she-kit. "Do you remember anything?

Like your name?"

The kit nodded happily. "I remember my name! I'm Lavender".

Starlingwing nodded approvingly. *Lavender. What a perfect clan name.* "Okay Lavender, I'll be right back". She called to the kit. "I'm going to speak with our leader".

The kit waved her tail goodbye as Starlingwing brushed through the lichen covering the cave entrance. She nervously looked around for Lionstar, but she couldn't see him in the clearing. Perhaps he was in his den. As she was walking over to the tree stump where Lionstar slept, she heard the log entrance creak.

Hopeful that it was Lionstar, Starlingwing turned to watch the cat enter. She was disappointed when she saw Turtlefoot burst out of the log. The young warrior seemed bewildered and frantic, but before Starlingwing could ask what had happened, the tortoiseshell raced across the clearing and into the warrior's den.

Confused, Starlingwing started after her, but was interrupted by the sound of the log creaking once again. This time when she turned, Lionstar was slipping through the entrance into the camp. He, too, looked terrified, and Starlingwing wondered if it had anything to do with Turtlefoot. *One problem at a time.* She thought to herself, walking towards Lionstar to discuss Lavender.

The leader noticed her approaching, and quickly shook his pelt out. He appeared to be regaining his composure, then turned to face the tabby queen.

"Greetings, Starlingwing. Is Shadowkit doing better?"

Starlingwing nodded, relief filling her as she thought about her kit. "She's doing much better, thank you. Junipertwig thinks she'll be back in the nursery by tomorrow".

The red tom nodded. "That's great news, I'm glad to hear it".

"That's actually not what I came to talk to you about," She hesitated. *What if he wouldn't let the kit stay?* " It's about the new kit. She just woke up".

"Is that so," Lionstar said thoughtfully. "And how is she doing?"

"She's fine, health-wise, but the poor kit has lost her memory. She can't remember anything but her name, Lavender".

The leader looked surprised. "She doesn't even remember her mother?"

Starlingwing shook her head. "The thing is, when I opened my eyes and saw her, I felt an instant connection. I believe Starclan wanted her to come here, so I could raise her. I think I'm meant to be her mother".

Lionstar narrowed his eyes. "I've already decided that she cannot stay. With leaf-bare coming, it's just not possible".

Starlingwing's eyes widened. "You can't send a kit out to fend for herself, especially in the cold. That fox that killed her mother could very well come back and kill her too".

"I intend to ask the other clans if they will take her at the gathering tonight. If no one will, we can discuss this further. However, we have the most kits out of all of the clans, it would not be a good idea to take in another". With that, the leader brushed past her and disappeared into his den.

Disappointed, Starlingwing slowly made her way to the nursery. She should check on her other kits and make sure they were doing well. They needed one of their parents with them. Her mate had probably been out on patrols all day, preparing the clan for leaf-bare, and hadn't had a lot of time for them.

As she walked across the clearing, a bitter wind blew across the camp. She bushed up her dark fur against the cold, hurrying to get to the warmth of the nursery. Dark clouds hovered over the camp, threatening rain. She hoped it would clear in time for the gathering.

Just before she reached the nursery, the clouds broke open and rain poured down onto the camp. She heard many cats yelp in alarm, and she let out a gasp herself. The rain pounded down, sending cats

rushing into any nearby den. Starlingwing quickly ran into the nursery, shaking as the cold rain seeped into her pelt.

Plumeyes looked up as she entered, her deep blue eyes round with worry. "Is everything alright out there? I heard cats shouting".

"It started pouring rain, harder than I've ever seen it. I hope there's not a flood". Starlingwing mewed.

The ginger queen nodded. "I hope so too. A flood would be awful, especially with so many kits in the camp. Speaking of kits, how is Shadowkit?"

"She's doing good, just resting up. She should be able to return to the nursery tomorrow. How are my other kits doing?"

The tabby queen peered into Plumeyes' nest, where her two kits were curled up with the other four kits. All of them were sleeping peacefully, unaware of the storm that had started outside.

Plumeyes blinked at her reassuringly. "They're doing perfectly fine, they've had a lot of time to rest today. My kits have had fun pretending to take care of them".

Starlingwing purred. "That's great. I'm glad they're all doing good. It's hard to believe that your kits are already three moons old, and that Swanfur's will be apprenticed in less than a moon!"

Plumeyes shot up straight in her nest. "Where *are* Swanfur and her kits?"

Starlingwing looked around, her eyes widening. "I don't know!"

"They're out in that storm!" The ginger queen gasped.

"I'll go search for them!" Starlingwing raced out of the nursery, scanning the clearing.

She spotted the white queen and her kits, huddling under a small ledge at the edge of the clearing. They were all soaked and the kits were splashing around in the puddles. Swanfur seemed to be trying to coax them back to the nursery, but the kits were all having fun

and kept jumping away from her.

Starlingwing raced up to the queen and her kits, quickly stopping beside them. "Why aren't you inside?"

"No one is around to help carry the kits inside, and they won't go in on their own. I can't take them one by one because the others would wander off!" She mewed, panicked. "They're all going to catch whitecough!

"Don't worry, I'll grab a couple of warriors and we can take them all inside".

She turned and raced towards the warrior's den, poking her head inside. All the warriors huddled inside, turning to face her as she entered.

"What are you doing out in the storm?" Rowanroot asked, his green eyes flashing with concern.

"Swanfur is outside with her kits and I need two warriors to help carry them in, quickly!" She mewed urgently.

Rowanroot leapt to his feet. "Turtlefoot and I will help you!"

His mate looked at him wearily, getting to her feet a bit slower than him. "Sure, I'll come".

The two warriors followed Starlingwing out into the clearing. They raced towards Swanfur and her kits, quickly scooping each one up. Starlingwing grabbed Heatherkit, the smallest, and raced into the nursery. She gently set the soaking kit onto the ground, licking her fur the wrong way to warm her up. The gray and white kit squirmed away, shaking out her fur.

"I'm *fine!*" She mewed fiercely. "We were just playing outside".

Just then, Swanfur entered with Strikekit in her jaws, who was squirming around. "Put me down!" He mewed indignantly.

Swanfur gently set him by his sister. The two glared at their mother angrily, grumbling under their breaths. Turtlefoot and Rowanroot

entered the nursery with the last two kits, and quickly set them down with their siblings. Minkkit whipped around to face his mother.

"Where's father? I bet *he'd* let us play outside". He squeaked.

"Your father went out on a patrol right before the storm started. They haven't returned, so I'm guessing they're sheltering somewhere until the rain clears up". Rowanroot explained gently.

Swanfur turned to her kits, lashing her tail. "Puddlestripe would never let you out in this storm. Besides, I am your mother, so you need to listen to me. When I tell you to go inside, you go inside! Do you want to be apprenticed soon or not?"

The kits huffed, grudgingly apologizing. They quickly began licking themselves dry; they had started to shiver from the cold. Swanfur sighed and started to help the kits warm up, curling around them and licking their fur.

The commotion had woken up Starlingwing and Plumeyes' kits, who were mewling in Plumeyes' nest. Starlingwing gently picked up Slykit and placed him in her nest. She picked up her other kit, Gladekit, and placed her next to her brother. Curling up in the nest with them, she gently licked their heads. The tabby queen nudged them towards her belly and they began to suckle. Slykit's black fur was fluffed out against the cold, and Gladekit's tabby pelt was ruffled as well. Starlingwing pulled them closer to her, hoping they'd warm up soon.

Starlingwing looked up as a rain drop slipped through the nursery roof and hit her nose. She shuddered, wondering what would happen if the bramble walls of the nursery gave out during this storm. Another rain drop dripped down, this time hitting Slykit. He mewled in protest, trying to squirm away from the cold. Starlingwing quickly licked the drop off of his pelt and stood up. She tugged her nest away from the drip, settling down closer to the center of the bramble bush.

Plumeyes' kits had woken up completely, and were crawling out to play. The feistiest one, Shinekit, slowly crept up behind Rowanroot,

her blue eyes fixed on his twitching tail. Starlingwing suppressed a purr of laughter as she watched the tiny ginger kit stalk the warrior. Shinekit wiggled her tiny haunches, then leapt on the ginger warrior's tail. He yelped and whipped around, his eyes bright with amusement. He playfully pushed Shinekit over, and she rolled around on the dusty floor, giggling.

The other kits all began playing with Rowanroot, seeing who could capture his tail without him noticing. He looked perfectly content, and Starlingwing wondered why him and Turtlefoot didn't have kits yet. Glancing over at Turtlefoot, the tabby queen quickly realized why. The tortoiseshell warrior was looking on in discomfort, her eyes darting towards the entrance like she was itching to leave. It was obvious that Turtlefoot didn't want kits.

A few moments later, Starlingwing's mate burst through the nursery entrance. His black fur was sleek with rain water, and his whiskers glistened with drops. He raced over to Starlingwing, crouching by her side.

"How is Shadowkit?" He asked worriedly.

"She's doing fine," Starlingwing purred. "She should be able to come back to the nursery tomorrow night. There's something else I wanted to talk to you about..." She said hesitantly, preparing to tell him about Lavender.

Just then, the pounding sound of rain ceased. Everyone in the nursery sighed in relief, and Turtlefoot and Rownroot stood up, preparing to return to the warrior's den. Before they could, Lionstar's voice echoed through the camp.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting".

Starlingwing glanced down at her kits. They had fallen fast asleep, so she stood up and left the den with the rest of the cats. She sat near the nursery entrance with Swanfur and her kits; Plumeyes had stayed in the nursery with her kits to let them suckle. Midnightfur settled down next to Starlingwing, pressing against her to keep warm. She purred, happy to have him there.

Swanfur's mate, Puddlestripe, had just returned from patrol and trotted over to join them. He greeted his kits with a swift lick around their ears before sitting next to Swanfur. She nuzzled him affectionately before turning her attention to the Great Stump.

Lionstar stood on top of the stump, waiting for the cats to settle down. When everyone was quiet, he addressed the clan. "It is time for me to announce who will come to the gathering with me. Due to the storm, I will be taking a smaller group than usual. I want enough warriors here to protect the kits and elders in case the rain returns and causes flooding".

The leader scanned the camp, his reddish brown fur darkening as the sun slid below the horizon. "Poppyfoot will accompany me as usual, I still need my deputy after all. Fawnface, Soilclaw, Mousenose, Stumppaw, Blazethroat, Goldencurl, Jayflight, Wavewash, Vinetooth, Daisypaw, Lightstep, Spotpaw, Sprigleap, Turtlefoot, Rowanroot, Elkpaw, Cloudrun and Sprucesky. Junipertwig, I'd like you to accompany us, but if you need to stay with the ill kits I understand".

Strikekit leapt up excitedly. "I can take care of the kits while she's gone! I love being in the medicine cat's den".

The gathered cats purred in amusement, many suggesting that Strikekit should be Junipertwig's apprentice. Starlingwing meowed with laughter, while Swanfur gazed at her kit fondly. Lionstar's eyes glowed.

"That is a very generous offer, Strikekit. Maybe your mother and Starlingwing could help you take care of the sick kits while Junipertwig is at the gathering".

The black and white kit nodded eagerly, turning to Junipertwig. "Can I do it?"

Junipertwig nodded, her eyes full of approval. "Of course you can".

The kit sprang up, his tail twitching with joy. "Oh good. I can even practice learning my herbs while I'm in there".

He immediately raced towards the medicine cat's den, his head high. Swanfur followed close behind him, and they disappeared through the lichen screen together. Before following them, Starlingwing turned to Midnightfur. "Will you stay with our other kits? I'd like to keep an eye on Shadowkit while Junipertwig is gone".

"Of course," Midnightfur mewed, licking her head affectionately. "I'll see you later". He turned and disappeared into the nursery. Puddlestripe was also herding the rest of his kits back into the nursery, nudging them gently from behind.

The group of cats that had been selected to go to the gathering were beginning to slip through the log tunnel and out of camp. Starlingwing's brother, Mousenose, spotted her as he was leaving. He ran up to her and said a quick goodbye before following the other cats out of camp. He walked beside his apprentice, Stumppaw, as they left.

Starlingwing watched the last cat slip through the log tunnel before turning towards the medicine cat's den. She pushed her way through the lichen curtain and greeted Shadowkit and Lavender warmly. Both kits were sleepy, so she curled up in the nest with them and closed her eyes. Soon, both kits were sleeping soundly, and Starlingwing sighed with content as she let herself drift off to sleep as well.

# Chapter 4

Daisypaw trotted behind her mentor as they followed their clan members to the gathering. She was pleased that she'd been chosen to attend the gathering, and even more pleased that Stumppaw was coming with them. She had begun to develop feelings for him, and she got butterflies every time he talked to her. Ever since they'd trained together earlier, she'd been smitten.

She slyly glanced over at him, and noticed with a start that he was staring at her too. They both quickly looked away, and Daisypaw's pelt grew hot. She looked up and saw her mentor staring at her in amusement. *He saw!* Daisypaw realized with alarm.

Embarrassed, she stared down at her paws until they reached the gathering. Daisypaw was still entranced by the gathering place, and loved whenever she was allowed to attend. It was a large clearing with flowers and grass growing throughout it. A large stream split around the clearing and met again on the other side, turning into a small waterfall and flowing through the trees, out of sight. Five boulders sat on one side of the clearing, all leaning against each other. Each leader stood on a boulder to address the clan cats at gatherings.

She followed her clanmates as they leapt over the stream surrounding the clearing. Beechclan, Mapleclan, and Alderclan had already arrived, but Daisypaw saw no sign of Oakclan yet. Daisypaw spotted her father and brother among her clanmates, and weaved through the cats to get to them. She settled beside them and her father greeted her with a swift lick around her ear.

"How did training go earlier?" Cloudrun mewed.

"Great!" Daisypaw mewed excitedly. "Vinetooth said he thinks it's time for my assessment!"

Elkpaw glanced at her sharply. "What about me and Leafpaw?"

"Vinetooth was going to talk to your mentors when we got back from training, but the rainstorm hit and he didn't have time. I'm sure he'll talk to them tomorrow, and Lionstar too!"

Elkpaw's eyes lit up in excitement. "So we might be assessed soon!"

Cloudrun purred loudly. "I'm so proud you!"

Daisypaw purred back and leaned against her father happily. Just then, Daisypaw spotted Lionstar climbing on top of his boulder in front of the gathered cats. Aspenstar, Brindlestar, and Tulipstar followed, sitting on their respective boulders. Daisypaw glanced around, realizing that Oakclan had still not arrived.

Not long after she had begun to wonder where they were, she spotted them leaping over the stream and into the clearing. However, they were being led by the deputy, Dewcreek, instead of Cloverstar. Daisypaw watched, puzzled, as Dewcreek leapt onto Cloverstar's boulder.

"I apologize for being late," the deputy mewed curtly.

Lionstar dipped his head to the deputy. "That's quite alright. May I ask where Cloverstar is?"

"She had her kits and wished to remain in the nursery with them. She sent me as her replacement". The light gray she-cat explained quickly.

Cats from all clans mewed their congratulations, and the other leaders dipped their heads. Dewcreek thanked the clan cats, then stared down at all of them, a challenge flashing in her green eyes. "This does not make us weak. We still have a standing leader and deputy, and warriors ready to fight if attacked".

The clan cats shifted uncomfortably, and Daisypaw glanced at her father in confusion. "Why is she being so harsh?" She whispered.

"Sometimes, when a leader has kits, the other clans take that as a sign that they are weakened. They try to use it to their advantage

by attacking and attempting to steal part of their territory. Dewcreek wants everyone to know that they are still strong and will fight if they are attacked. It's not right, but sometimes that's how warrior life is".

Daisypaw stared at her father in disbelief. How could the other clans be so cruel? Kits should be celebrated, not thought of as an opportunity to steal territory. Shaken, she turned her attention back to the leaders.

Brindlestar cleared her throat awkwardly. "Right, let's begin the gathering".

The brindle she-cat stepped to the front of her boulder to address the watching cats. "Mapleclan has two new apprentices, Flashpaw and Skypaw, as well as a new medicine cat apprentice, Tiltpaw".

The clan cats cheered the new names. Daisypaw glanced over and spotted the two apprentices sitting proudly by their mentors. At the bottom of Brindlestar's boulder, she spotted the new medicine cat apprentice sitting next to the Mapleclan medicine cat, Hollytrot. The small white tom ducked his head in embarrassment; Daisypaw noticed that he was trying to hide one of his front paws, which appeared to be badly disfigured. She wondered what happened, and vowed to ask Junipertwig about it later.

"We also have a new warrior, Larkcall".

As the clan cats cheered the name, Daisypaw spotted a small brown tabby tom looking embarrassed. A light brown she-cat sat beside him, her head raised proudly. *That must be the new warrior and his mother.* Daisypaw realized. Sitting next to the she-cat was a fierce, dark gray tom. Daisypaw assumed this was Larkcall's father; his amber eyes shined with pride and ambition.

As the cheering died down, Brindlestar began speaking again. "We also have a new litter of kits! Moonglow and Bramblethorn had an impressive six kits. They are all doing well, and will help our clan grow strong".

Mapleclan cats yowled their approval as Brindlestar ended her

speech. She stepped back from the front of her rock and nodded at Aspenstar to make his speech. The light brown tom padded to the front of his boulder to address the watching cats.

"Beechclan is doing great. Prey is running well, despite the approaching leafbare, and we are stronger than ever. Pondsnap made the decision to join the elder's den, where he will finally be able to relax after a long life of being a fierce warrior".

The clan cats dipped their heads respectfully for the new elder. Aspenstar nodded his thanks and continued. "We have new apprentices as well, Frostpaw and Waterpaw".

The clans yowled their congratulations as Aspenstar stepped back from the front of his boulder. He nodded to Lionstar, who walked forward. "Pineclan is doing well. Prey is running, and we have not yet felt the harshness of leafbare. However, just before the gathering, our clan was hit with a rather sudden rainstorm. Did any other clans experience this?"

The other leaders shook their heads wearily. "Could it be an omen from Starclan?" One of the medicine cats called.

Junipertwig hesitated. "I'm not sure; it could've been. I'll keep an eye out for any other signs".

Lionstar nodded. "I have other news as well. While patrolling earlier today, some of my cats found a kit just off of clan territory whose mother was killed by a fox. The fox is still out there, so keep an eye out. We have many kits in our clan right now, so I'm not sure we can feed another mouth; is any other clan willing to take her in?"

The other leaders hesitated, shifting uncomfortably. Daisypaw realized that none of them wanted another mouth to feed so close to leafbare; prey would be sparse enough. Each leader shook their heads, and Lionstar's tail drooped.

"Very well, we will figure out what to do with the kit ourselves. Speaking of kits, we have a new litter. Starlingwing and Midnightfur had a litter of three kits last night. One was born unwell, but she is stronger now thanks to Junipertwig. That is all".

Lionstar stepped back, and Dewcreek took her place at the front of her boulder. "Oakclan is doing well. We have two new litters of kits. Cloverstar and Nuzzletail had a litter of four healthy kits, while Quicksnow and Larkwing had two healthy kits. Prey is running well and our warriors and apprentices are training hard".

As she stepped back, the last leader, Tulipstar, stepped forward. "Prey has become scarcer with leafbare approaching, but we have still managed to find plenty. Our medicine cat, Splotchpelt, also found an abundance of catmint, which will be helpful if this leafbare brings greencough and whitecough. If any other clans should need it, we will be happy to share".

The other leaders murmured their appreciation, and Tulipstar dipped her head in response. "I'm happy to announce that we have three new apprentices: Frozenpaw, Onepaw, and Loudpaw".

As the clan cats called their congratulations, Tulipstar leapt down from her boulder, signaling the end of the gathering. The clans began mingling, and Daisypaw found herself surrounded by cats she didn't know. Suddenly nervous, she frantically looked around for a familiar face. Relief washed over her as she spotted Turtlefoot standing underneath a nearby tree. Daisypaw trotted over to join her.

"Hey, Turtlefoot". She mewed as she neared the tortoiseshell she-cat.

Turtlefoot didn't turn around at her greeting, and Daisypaw realized she was focused on something else. Intrigued, she followed Turtlefoot's gaze. She was staring at a dark brown she-cat with a white face. Daisypaw recognized the cat as Petalface from Mapleclan; she'd seen her at a gathering before. The she-cat looked nervous as she scanned the clearing, clearly looking for someone. *Why is Turtlefoot so interested in this cat?* Daisypaw wondered.

Suddenly Petalface bounded across the clearing, heading towards Lionstar. *What does she want with our leader?* Daisypaw watched as the she-cat approached him. When she reached the leader, she uttered a greeting. Lionstar practically leapt into the air, and Daisypaw's eyes widened with shock. *Why is he so on edge?*

Turtlefoot flinched as she watched, and Daisypaw glanced up at her. "Do you know what's going on?"

Turtlefoot jumped, startled. "How long have you been watching?"

"For awhile now. Why are you watching them? What are they talking about?"

Turtlefoot glanced around nervously, then leaned closer to Daisypaw. "I noticed that Lionstar was acting weird earlier, so I followed him out of camp". She whispered.

"Where did he go?" Daisypaw asked in confusion.

Turtlefoot hesitated, then took a deep breath. "He crossed the border into Mapleclan and met up with that cat. She told him... she told him that she's having his kits".

Daisypaw stepped back, horrified. "What about Goldencurl? And Lightstep and Lilyfoot? Or the warrior code?"

"I know, everything is so messed up. What should we do?" Turtlefoot hissed.

"We should tell somebody!" Daisypaw exclaimed urgently.

Turtelfoot shook her head. "We can't! It would ruin the reputation of our clan and make us weak".

"Do we at least tell Goldencurl?"

"No, we can't tell anybody".

Daisypaw sighed. "So we just have to let it happen?"

Turtelfoot nodded grimly. "I'm afraid so".

# Chapter 5

Turtlefoot woke to a raindrop dripping onto her nose. She shook it off quickly and sat up, looking around the warrior's den. It was still dark outside, and the rest of the warriors were all fast asleep. Turtlefoot had just begun to lay back down when she noticed that her mate wasn't in his nest. *I don't remember him being on guard duty tonight*. Worried, Turtlefoot got to her feet and stuck her head out of the den entrance. It was almost pitch black, but she could just barely make out her mate's ginger pelt shining in the moonlight. He was sitting in the middle of the clearing, staring up at the full moon. Turtlefoot slowly padded towards him, concerned.

"Rowanroot? Are you okay?" She mewed quietly.

He sighed, turning to face her. "Do you ever want kits?"

*This again*. Turtlefoot thought with a huff. "I just became a warrior. I don't want to think about kits right now".

"That wasn't the question. Do you *ever* want kits?"

Deep down, Turtlefoot knew she didn't. She didn't want to have that kind of responsibility and she didn't want to give up warrior life, even if it was only temporary. Reluctantly, she shook her head. "No. No I don't".

Rowanroot took a step back, as if she'd clawed him. "And you waited until now to tell me? You've always known that I want kits. How could you not tell me that you don't?"

"Because I love you! I couldn't stand the thought of not being with you and I knew that not wanting kits would be a dealbreaker!"

"You're right," Rowanroot hissed. "It is a dealbreaker".

He turned around angrily and stalked away, heading back into the warriors den. Turtlefoot stared after him in shock, trembling with grief. Not knowing what to do, she raced through the log entrance, heading into the forest. The guard on duty, Graystream, called after her.

"Turtlefoot, where are you going? You can't go into the forest at night alone! What about the fox?"

Ignoring him, Turtlefoot pushed on. She ran until her lungs were burning and her paws hurt. She thought about stopping, but she didn't want to be overwhelmed with the image of Rowanroot leaving her. Suddenly she felt her paw catch on something and a searing pain ran up her hind leg. Turtlefoot crashed to the ground, her heart lurching as she did. *Did I break my leg?* She wondered in horror.

Slowly, she turned her head to inspect her hind leg. Turtlefoot thanked Starclan when she saw that it wasn't twisted or deformed; she must've just wrenched something. Gently, the she-cat tested her weight on the leg. Pain shot through her leg once again and she yowled, falling back to the ground.

Beginning to panic, Turtlefoot tried to think of a way to get back to camp. She thought she might be able to limp back, and tried to haul herself onto her other three paws. Before she could, she heard a rustle in the bushes near her, and a pungent scent hit her nose. She gasped quietly, recognizing the scent. *Fox.*

Ready to fight, Turtlefoot hauled herself onto her three good paws. She spotted the fox's nose poke through the bushes, and its beady eyes followed. Soon the fox was standing in front of her, snarling. Turtlefoot growled, trying to sound as fierce as possible. The fox circled her and lashed its claws out, slashing through Turtlefoot's flank. She screeched in pain, stumbling sideways.

Regaining her balance, Turtlefoot ran her claws down the fox's muzzle, drawing blood. The fox recoiled in pain, then crouched low to the ground. Turtlefoot backed up slowly, realizing it was going to

pounce. She knew she couldn't run, so she stood her ground, preparing for the attack.

The fox leapt through the air, bowling her over. She shrieked and writhed beneath its weight, pummeling its stomach with her good hind leg. The fox dug its teeth into her shoulder and Turtlefoot yowled. She began to feel weak, the pain of her injuries getting to her. The fox stared at her menacingly, then lunged towards her throat, gnashing its razor sharp teeth at her. Turtlefoot closed her eyes, waiting for the fox to rip her throat out.

Suddenly, the weight of the fox disappeared, and she heard the fierce yowls of another cat fighting the fox. Turtlefoot lifted her head to see who had saved her. She recognized Graystream's gray pelt and green eyes as he tussled with the fox. The fox let out a wail as the warrior slashed his claws repeatedly over its orange pelt. With one last snarl, the fox turned and fled back into the forest.

Graystream turned around and raced back to Turtlefoot. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Turtlefoot slowly sat up, shaking. "I was running and I tripped. I... I think I wrenched my leg and I couldn't walk on it. Then the fox attacked me and I couldn't run; I thought I was going to die".

"Well, luckily I followed you. You seemed upset and I wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn't want you out here alone with the fox".

"Thank you". Turtlefoot sighed.

"Why were you running in the first place?" Graystream asked hesitantly.

Turtlefoot hesitated before answering. "Rowanroot and I are no longer mates. I just needed to get away".

Graystream pressed against her comfortingly. "I'm sorry to hear that".

Turtlefoot shook out her pelt. "Let's just get back to camp".

Graystream nodded and stood up. "Here, lean on me".

By the time the two warriors got back to camp, the sky was beginning to lighten. Turtlefoot knew that the dawn patrol would already be getting ready to leave. She just hoped that Rowanroot wasn't on the patrol.

As Graystream helped her through the log entrance, Turtlefoot's heart sank as she heard Rowanroot's voice. "Has anyone seen Turtlefoot? She didn't come back to her nest last night after..." His voice trailed off. "She just didn't come back to her nest last night".

Turtlefoot sighed and limped through the log tunnel. Her cuts stung as the bark scraped against them and she winced in pain. She entered the camp entrance, hoping no one would notice her. Graystream slipped out behind her and let her lean on him again. They made their way to the medicine cat's den, but before they could get there, Turtlefoot heard Rowanroot's voice.

"Turtlefoot? What happened?" He raced over, concern in his voice.

Fury bubbled up inside of Turtlefoot's chest. How dare he act like he cares. She whipped around to face him, and hissed furiously. "It's not your business anymore".

With that, she stalked into the medicine cat's den, her leg buckling beneath her as she entered. Graystream raced to her side, quickly propping her up. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine". She reassured him. "My leg just hurts".

The tortoiseshell she-cat heard the rustling of a nest, and Junipertwig's head popped out of it. "Turtlefoot? Is that you? Why do I smell blood?"

"Turtlefoot went into the forest last night and got attacked by a fox. She also wrenched her paw". Graystream explained.

Junipertwig quickly scrambled out of her nest to inspect Turtlefoot's wounds. "Luckily its nothing serious. Your paw has a minor sprain and your wounds are shallow. You'll be out of here in a few days".

Turtlefoot sighed in relief. "Thank you, Junipertwig".

The medicine cat nodded. "Now Graystream, help her over to that empty nest and get her settled".

The gray warrior nodded and nudged Turtlefoot to her feet. She leaned against him as he helped her to the nest, and she collapsed into it. She blinked up at Graystream gratefully. "Thank you. I'd be dead without you".

Graystream ducked his head, embarrassed. "You would've fought that fox off eventually. You're a tough warrior. Now get some sleep, you must be exhausted. I'll check on you again later". He gently licked her head, then turned and slipped through the lichen covering the entrance.

Turtlefoot watched him go, feeling a fluttering in her stomach. She remembered when they'd been apprentices together; she'd had the biggest crush on him. But when she became a warrior before him, she didn't want to wait to find a mate. So when Rowanroot showed interest in her, she forgot about Graystream and focused on Rowanroot. Now, Turtlefoot realized that had been the wrong choice.

"Okay," Junipertwig snapped Turtlefoot out of her thoughts. "I have sticks and bindweed to bind your leg. Stick it straight out please".

Turtlefoot obliged, sticking her leg out. Junipertwig quickly bound the tortoiseshell warrior's leg, then returned to her herb store. "I'll make a poultice to help heal the sprain faster".

When the medicine cat returned, she was carrying a group of green leaves. "These are elder leaves. I'll chew them up and put the poultice on your leg". Junipertwig hesitated. "Why were you in the forest last night?"

Turtlefoot sighed. "Rowanroot told me he didn't want to be my mate anymore. We just want different things".

"I'm sorry to hear that". Junipertwig murmured. "Have you had any stomach or side pain? I might need to check for broken ribs". She

asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Now that you mention it, I have had a bit of stomach pain".

"Alright, I'll check that after I put a salve on your wounds". The medicine cat returned with some yellow flowers. "This is goldenrod. It'll help your wounds heal quickly and properly".

Turtlefoot nodded, lying still while Junipertwig applied the goldenrod salve. She winced as it seeped into her wounds, but relaxed as it slowly began to soothe them. Closing her eyes, she sank into her nest; she was exhausted. She was beginning to drift off to sleep when Junipertwig lightly shook her.

"You can sleep in a bit, just let me check for broken ribs first". She said gently.

"Okay," Turtlefoot grumbled, rolling onto her side.

Junipertwig gently pressed on the top of her ribs. "Does it hurt here?"

Turtlefoot shook her head. "No, not there".

Junipertwig moved lower down her ribs. "Here?"

"No". Turtlefoot hesitated. "Actually, it doesn't really feel like my ribs. The pain comes and goes in my lower stomach".

Junipertwig nodded slowly. "Have you had any other symptoms before you got attacked?"

Turtlefoot tilted her head, confused. *What was Junipertwig going on about?* "Like what?"

"Have you been more tired lately? Extra hungry? Nauseous?"

Turtlefoot thought back to the previous days. She had been a little more tired than usual, and she was definitely eating more. "I guess I have been more tired and hungry lately".

Junipertwig slowly moved her paws over Turtlefoot's lower

stomach, pressing down gently. She nodded decidedly and sat up. "The pain and other symptoms are because you're expecting. You and Rowanroot are going to have kits!" The medicine cat announced.

*No! This can't be happening!* Turtlefoot jolted up in her nest. "But I don't want kits! That's why Rowanroot and I aren't together anymore!"

An uncomfortable look came across Junipertwig's face. "I guess you could give them up to another queen when they're born, but... kits really are better off with their biological mother. Plus Rowanroot might not agree, and the clan might look down on you for it".

Horrified, Turtlefoot sank back into her nest. She stared off into the distance, shocked. Junipertwig hurried over to her herb store again and returned with some poppy seeds.

"Here, take these. They'll help with the shock". She murmured awkwardly. Quickly shaking her fur out, she changed her tone to a more upbeat one. "The good news is, you'll have a couple of days to think things over while you let your leg heal. I'll go tell Lionstar that you're off of warrior duties for a few days. Don't worry, I won't mention the kits until you're ready".

Turtlefoot barely even looked up as Junipertwig left. *How am I supposed to raise kits? And what about Graystream? Will I ever get to be with him now?* Defeated, the tortoiseshell she-cat lowered her head onto her paws. She closed her eyes and slowly let herself drift into darkness.

# Chapter 6

Starlingwing woke to her kits mewling next to her. She sat up slowly, staring down at her two beautiful kits. She couldn't wait until Shadowkit could join them in the nursery later that day. The queen gently ushered the kits towards her belly, where they began to suckle.

She glanced around the den and noticed Swanfur's kits sleeping by themselves. Puzzled, she looked over at Plumeyes, who was already awake. "Where's Swanfur?" She asked curiously.

"Her siblings are having their assessments today; she went to go wish them good luck. They've probably just left". Plumeyes explained.

"Hopefully they do well; we could use more warriors with leafbare on its way!" Swanfur noted.

Plumeyes mewed in agreement as she cleaned her whiskers. Having four lively kits was exhausting her, and Starlingwing noticed that she barely ever had time to groom herself. Before she could offer the queen some help, the bramble walls shook and a cat pushed their way through.

Starlingwing was delighted to see Junipertwig enter with Shadowkit in her jaws. The black kit was squirming and mewling hungrily.

"Shadowkit!" Starlingwing purred, patting down an area for the kit in her nest.

The kit immediately began to suckle as Junipertwig placed her beside her littermates. Starlingwing sighed, glad to have all of her kits with her. Still, her nest looked rather empty, and she felt like

her family wasn't quite complete. For a moment, she couldn't put her paw on what the problem was. Suddenly, she realized what it was and turned to Junipertwig.

"How is Lavender?" She asked.

The medicine cat hesitated, her blue eyes clouding. "None of the other clans will take her since leafbare is approaching. Lionstar is contemplating giving her to the kittypets living in the twoleg place".

"Kittypets? She can't grow up as a kittypet! She's perfect for clan life". Starlingwing mewed urgently.

"I know, and she seems to want to live here. But Lionstar doesn't think we can handle another kit. Especially not with..." Junipertwig hesitated. "Never mind. We just have too many kits".

Starlingwing stared at the medicine cat, wondering what she had been about to say. Was another she-cat expecting kits? Before she could ask, Junipertwig turned to Plumeyes. "How is your milk supply? Still coming? I know four kits can be a lot to feed".

Plumeyes shook her head. "It's still coming and I haven't had any problems. Although I don't think it would be an issue if I did since they seem to prefer fresh-kill now over milk".

"Great", Junipertwig nodded. "Fresh-kill will help them grow big and strong".

The gray and white cat quickly dipped her head to the queens and left the nursery. Plumeyes turned to Starlingwing once she was gone. "Are you going to talk to Lionstar about Lavender? It's not right to send her away".

The tabby queen nodded. "I'll speak to him once my kits are done eating".

Just then the entrance to the den shook again, and Swanfur entered, looking anxious. "I hope they do well during their assessments. It looks like it's about to rain again".

"They'll do just fine". Starlingwing purred reassuringly, remembering her own warrior assessment. She had been so nervous that it was difficult to focus, and she'd thought for sure she'd failed. But when she returned to camp, her mentor had reassured her that she'd done great and would become a warrior.

As the queens discussed the possible rain, Starlingwing's kits stopped suckling one by one and went back to sleep. When the last one, Gladekit, had curled up in the nest, Starlingwing got to her paws.

"I'll be right back," She mewed. "I'm going to discuss Lavender's fate with Lionstar".

The tabby queen headed into the clearing, glancing around fervently for the leader's red pelt. She caught sight of him just as he slipped into his den in the hollow of the Great Stump. She trotted over hurriedly, pausing outside the moss covered entrance.

"Lionstar?" She called.

The leader grunted. "Come in".

Starlingwing squeezed through the mossy roots and into the den. Lionstar was sitting in the middle of it, staring off into space. He looked unkempt and distracted. Starlingwing was surprised by her leader's appearance. Usually he was very put together and focused.

The tom turned his head as she entered. "How can I help you Starlingwing? If this is about Lavender, don't bother. I've made up my mind that she cannot stay".

Starlingwing opened her mouth to protest, but before she could, thunder rumbled threateningly from above. Starlingwing could see rain drops dripping from the den entrance, and a shiver went down her spine. Suddenly the sound of pounding rain became deafening, and Starlingwing could hear cats yowling in alarm once again.

"Great Starclan, not this again!" Lionstar hissed irritably. "Return to the nursery and make sure the queens and kits are safe".

Starlingwing hung her head; clearly there was no chance of

Lavender staying. She quickly raced out of the leader's den and across the clearing, her heart aching. She plunged into the bramble entrance of the nursery, quickly scrambling inside.

"What is with this rain?" Plumeyes mewed, shocked.

"I don't know! Puddlestripe said none of the other clans mentioned a storm at the gathering. It's like Starclan is angry with us". Swanfur said, worry creeping into her mew.

Just then Strikekit poked his head out of the white queen's nest. "Starclan *is* angry with us. They told me last night".

"What?" Swanfur asked, her mouth gaping.

"A black cat came to see me last night. Her pelt was shining and it looked like it had stars in it! She said her name was Darkstar and that she had a special message for me". He squeaked happily.

Starlingwing blinked at the kit, shocked. Darkstar was Pineclan's last leader; she had died after being trapped under a rock during a terrible flood. She had lost the last of her lives after she was unable to get free. "And what was this special message?" She managed to choke out at last.

"She started talking in this deep, scary voice and said, 'Pineclan's fate is in the paws of one cat. If they are turned away, the clan will suffer great misfortune and history will repeat itself'. Then she disappeared and I woke up", The kit finished.

The three queens stared at each other in stunned silence, and it lasted for what seemed like days. At last, Swanfur shakily got to her paws. "We need to speak to Junipertwig and see what she thinks. Then we should talk to Lionstar".

"We can't go out in the storm right now". Starlingwing pointed out worriedly.

"We'll wait until it passes", Swanfur decided. "Then Strikekit and I will tell Junipertwig".

It was nearly dark out when the rain finally let up. Swanfur slowly

got to her paws, looking wary. "Okay Strikekit, let's go tell Junipertwig about your dream".

"I'll come too," Starlingwing murmured reassuringly. "For support".

Swanfur blinked at her gratefully before leading the way out of the nursery. Starlinwing's paws squelched in the mud as she stepped into the clearing. Puddles dotted the camp, and Starlingwing shuddered as she remembered the flood that had happened when she was a new warrior, the flood that had killed Darkstar. The clan had moved to a new camp to avoid more floods, but Starlingwing couldn't shake the feeling that it would happen again.

Strikekit squeaked in excitement as he splashed around in a nearby puddle. Starlingwing purred in amusement until she noticed Swanfur looking less than pleased. The white queen was obviously worried about her kit's dream and was not in a playful mood. She gave Strikekit a stern look and he quickly scrambled out of the puddle, shaking water from his fur.

Starlinwing followed Swanfur and Strikekit to the cave where Junipertwig had her den. But before they could reach the den, Lionstar leapt onto the Great Stump. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather by the Great Stump for a clan meeting," He yowled.

Swanfur sighed, padding towards the Great Stump. "I guess we'll have to wait until after the meeting".

Starlingwing nodded in agreement, following the queen. Strikekit bounced along beside them, playing in the mud and puddles. *At least someone enjoys the rain.* Starlingwing thought to herself.

For the first time, Starlingwing noticed Daisypaw, Leafpaw, and Elkpaw standing proudly by their mentors. *They must've passed their assessments despite the rain!* Starlingwing thought in amazement.

Lionstar stood beaming on the Great Stump. "It is my pleasure to hold one of the most important ceremonies known to clan cats. Daisypaw, Leafpaw, and Elkpaw showed great warrior abilities during their warrior assessments, and I am proud to make them

warriors. Since the rain forced all prey into their dens, these apprentices worked together to drive out and catch multiple pieces of prey". He gestured to the full fresh-kill pile with his tail.

The clan cheered loudly, and Starlingwing noticed Swanfur purring proudly. Her and Strikekit quietly maneuvered through the crowd to sit by Swanfur's brother, Frogclaw, and their parents, Astertuft and Cloudrun.

Lionstar stepped to the front of the stump. "Leafpaw, please step forward".

The lithe brown she-cat nervously approached the leader. Her whiskers were trembling, but her eyes glowed with excitement. Lionstar leapt down from the stump to face the apprentice. "I, Lionstar, leader of Pineclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Leafpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Leafpaw nodded passionately. "I do!"

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Leafpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Leafstorm. Starclan honors your wisdom and teamwork, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Pineclan". Lionstar rested his chin on Leafstorm's head, and she respectfully licked his shoulder.

"Leafstorm! Leafstorm!" The clan cats yowled.

The new warrior happily padded away to sit by her family. Lionstar turned to the remaining apprentices. "Elkpaw, please step forward".

The tom slowly padded forward, his brown eyes flashing worriedly. He stopped in front of Lionstar, dipping his head politely to the leader. Lionstar returned the greeting, facing the young cat.

"I, Lionstar, leader of Pineclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a

warrior in their turn. Elkpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Elkpaw breathed out.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Elkpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Elkgust. Starclan honors your hunting skills and speed, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Pineclan".

Lionstar once again placed his chin on the new warrior's head, and Elkgust licked his shoulder. "Elkgust! Elkgust!" The new warrior looked giddy as he joined Leafstorm by their family.

Starlingwing gazed fondly at the new warriors. It was hard to believe that someday her own kits would be up there receiving their warrior names. The excitement of the ceremony had almost made her forget about Strikekit's ominous dream. When she remembered, a sense of foreboding began to grow in her stomach. What was Pineclan's fate?

# Chapter 7

Daisypaw watched anxiously as her brother received his warrior name. She proudly cheered his new name with the rest of their clanmates, but her mind was whirling. *I'm next.* She thought, her whole body trembling.

Lionstar turned his head and fixed her with his green stare. "Daisypaw, please step forward".

It felt like her paws had been turned to stone, and she had to force each one in front of the other to reach her leader. He could obviously see how nervous she was, and gave her a reassuring look. His support eased her nerves slightly, but she couldn't help thinking about what Turtlefoot had told her at the gathering. *How could this kind cat break the warrior code? Even worse, how could he betray his family?*

"I, Lionstar, leader of Pineclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn," Lionstar began. "Daisypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do". She mewed confidently.

Lionstar nodded approvingly at the certainty in her tone. "Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Daisypaw, from this moment on you will be known as Daisystream. Starclan honors your confidence and strength, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Pineclan".

Daisystream felt her pelt grow hot as her clanmates cheered her name. She awkwardly trotted over to her family, touching noses with all of them. Astertuft covered her face in licks, purring so loudly that Daisystream thought she might lose her voice.

"I'm so proud of you three. All of my kits are warriors now!" She mewed, both happy and wistful.

"We'll make more". Cloudrun mewed jokingly.

Daisystream screwed up her face, pretending to be disgusted, and her littermates purred in amusement. Swanfur shook her head, a grin across her face, while Frogclaw just rolled his eyes. Daisystream glanced at all of them, feeling a rush of affection for her family. Now that she was a warrior, she might have her own little family soon.

She shyly glanced over at Stumppaw, wondering if he'd join her as a warrior soon. He was staring at her with admiration, and Daisystream locked eyes with him. She curled her tail up happily, and he waved his tail at her.

Daisystream turned back to her family, desperate to talk to someone about her crush. She started towards Swanfur before she noticed the distracted look in her sister's eyes. Before she could ask what was wrong, the white queen got to her paws and led one of her sons, Strikekit, towards the medicine cat's den.

Daisystream watched them go, worried. *Was Strikekit sick?* She wondered. The new warrior contemplated following them, then shook her head. *She'll tell me what's going on when she's ready.* She decided.

The sun had begun to set, and Daisystream knew her vigil would start soon. The queens and kits were all back in the nursery, preparing to sleep, and the apprentices were starting to head to their den as well. The elders were no where to be seen, and Daisystream assumed they were already asleep. Even some of the warriors were making their way to their den, though many of them still lay in the fading sun, sharing tongues with one another.

When the last of the warriors had disappeared into their den, Daisystream made her way to the edge of the camp. She sat silently, facing the entrance. Her littermates joined her, both keeping quiet as well. Darkness fell over the camp, causing long shadows to stretch across the clearing. Daisystream shifted uneasily; she had

never been a fan of the dark. Her brother pressed close to her, sensing her discomfort. Though he didn't say anything, she felt comforted by his presence and began to relax.

The night stretched on, and Daisystream's eyes grew tired. Her eyelids drooped, only to snap open at a nudge from her sister. She sat up straight, blinking her eyes to try and rid them of exhaustion. Her sister's eyes were dull with tiredness as well, and her brother was barely keeping himself upright. Daisystream quickly stretched her legs, feeling more awake as her tense muscles relaxed. Her littermates followed her example, their eyes brightening a bit as well.

After what seemed like moons, Daisystream spotted a glow on the horizon. Relieved, she realized it was almost dawn. The sun broke over the faraway hills, shining its first weak rays down onto the camp. The dawn patrol emerged from the warriors den, yawning as they padded into the clearing. The head of the patrol, Olivepatch, padded up to the new warriors.

"Your vigil is over, go get some rest". She murmured quietly.

"Thank you, Olivepatch". Daisystream dipped her head to the older warrior and followed her littermates to their new den.

Three new nests were in the center of the den, waiting for them. Gratefully, Daisysteam sank into the bed of moss and bracken, curling into a tight ball. She could hear her siblings beginning to snore, and soon she slipped into sleep as well, the warmth of her sleeping denmates washing over her.

She awoke at sunhigh to hear Lionstar calling the clan together. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting".

The white she-cat sat up in her nest and stretched. Her jaws gaped in a massive yawn as she prodded her sleeping littermates. "Come on, there's a clan meeting". She mumbled, climbing out of her nest.

Elkgust growled in annoyance. "So many clan meetings lately. All I wanna do is sleep".

"Come on you lazy furball". Leafstorm grumbled at Elkgust, following Daisystream out of the den.

Daiystream glanced over her shoulder and saw Elkgust reluctantly getting out of his nest. He shook scraps of loose moss out of his brown fur and followed his littermates into the clearing. When the three cats reached the Great Stump, they quickly settled down and turned their attention to their leader.

Daisystream's ears pricked in surprise as she saw Swanfur and her kits sitting nearby. She didn't know they were being apprenticed today, but it was about time. A purr rose in her throat as she watched the kits, their chests puffed out proudly. Only Strikekit looked solemn; his whiskers quivered and his paws shuffled in the dust. *He must be really nervous.*

Once the clan had settled down, Lionstar stepped to the front of the Great Stump. "I have gathered you all here today to witness the apprentice ceremony of these four kits". Murmurs of approval and excitement rose from the watching clan. Lionstar leaped down from the stump, facing the kits. "Heatherkit, please step forward".

The white and gray she-kit's fur bristled with excitement as she padded towards their leader. Daisystream noticed her paws bounce a bit before she regained her composure, and the white warrior suppressed a purr of amusement.

Lionstar's eyes glowed as he stared at the kit. "Heatherkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Heatherpaw. Your mentor will be Heronlight. I hope Heronlight will pass down all she knows about hunting and fighting to you".

The clan cats cheered the paw's new name as she raced up to Heronlight. She excitedly touched noses with the silver she-cat, whose usually cool demeanor was replaced with happiness for a brief moment. Daisystream purred, knowing they would be a good fit. Heatherpaw's cheerful attitude might put Heronlight in a good mood more often.

The ceremony continued, with Stormkit becoming Stormpaw and being apprenticed to Ivysprout. The young warrior's eyes gleamed with excitement as she touched noses with Stormpaw. This was her first apprentice, and she was clearly pleased. Daisystream spotted Turtlefoot sitting by the entrance to the medicine cat's den. Her expression was taut with jealousy as she stared at her sister, Ivysprout. A wave of sympathy washed over Daisystream as she stared at the injured she-cat. She was probably wondering if she would've received an apprentice as well if it weren't for her bad leg. The white she-cat blinked kindly at Turtlefoot, whose gaze softened at the gesture.

Turning her attention back to the ceremony, Daisystream was just in time to see Minkkit become Minkpaw. His mentor, Jayflight, gently touched noses with him, an uncomfortable look across his face. Daisystream realized with a start that both of Turtlefoot's littermates had received apprentices. She glanced back to cast an apologetic look at the tortoiseshell she-cat, but Turtlefoot had already turned and was limping back into the medicine cat's den, her tail drooping.

"Strikekit, please step forward". Daisystream was drawn back to the ceremony, delight pricking through her pelt. Perhaps Strikekit was going to be made a medicine cat's apprentice.

The black and white kit padded forward, his green eyes distracted and troubled. *What's bothering him?* Daisystream wondered silently. As he reached their leader, Daisystream thought she saw Lionstar shift uncomfortably. *Has something happened between them?*

"Strikekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Strikepaw. Your mentor will be Junipertwig. I hope Junipertwig will pass down all she knows about Starclan and healing to you".

The clan cats yowled excitedly, welcoming the new apprentices. Lionstar gestured with his tail for everyone to be silent once more. "I have one more announcement". He meowed. "I have decided to let the rogue kit, Lavender, remain in the clan. She will be looked after by Starlingwing and Midnightfur, and she will be raised with

their kits. From now until she is apprenticed, her name will be Lavenderkit". He leaped down from the stump, signaling the end of the meeting.

Shocked murmurs rang out from the watching clan cats. They had all expected Lionstar to turn the kit away from the clan since there were already so many kits. Daisystream herself hadn't expected that Lionstar would allow Lavenderkit to stay. Shrugging, she brushed it off. *He must've changed his mind.*

The new apprentices were excitedly heading out of camp with their mentors. Only Strikepaw and Junipertwig remained behind, discussing something in hushed tones. Daisystream could tell that their conversation was about something important, and she slowly edged closer to the two cats. She pretended to be casually choosing a piece of prey from the fresh-kill pile, and swiveled her ears to listen to what they were saying.

"You're sure Darkstar was talking about Lavenderkit?" Junipertwig asked urgently.

"Who else would she have been referring to? Nobody else was about to be turned away from the clan. She's the only one who makes sense". Strikepaw mewed defensively.

Junipertwig sighed. "You're probably right. But how is a kit going to save the clan from a terrible fate?" She muttered, half to herself.

"Maybe she won't be a kit anymore when her destiny calls". Strikepaw suggested.

The older medicine cat nodded. "That could be. So we have time to prepare for whatever is going to happen then".

"What do you think is going to happen?" Strikepaw mewed, a tremble in his voice.

"I don't know". Junipertwig answered, shaking her head. "Maybe Starclan will provide us with more information soon. All we know now is that Pineclan faces a terrible fate unless Lavenderkit can somehow save us".

Daisystream quickly snagged a mouse out of the pile and raced across the clearing, her heart pounding. She sank down onto a grassy patch near the edge of the camp; her legs felt weak and fear pulsed through her fur. The medicine cats' words echoed in her head. *Pineclan faces a terrible fate unless Lavenderkit can somehow save us.* Daisystream's stomach churned, and her mind whirled around one burning question. *Save us from what?*

# Chapter 8

Turtlefoot lay in her nest feeling miserable. Her littermates had both received an apprentice three sunrises ago, and she couldn't help feeling sorry for herself. Now that she was expecting kits, she'd probably have to wait moons for an apprentice. *I don't even want kits.* She thought resentfully.

The tortoiseshell warrior had convinced Junipertwig to let her stay in the medicine cat's den for a couple more sunrises. She wasn't ready to return to warrior duties yet, not with the knowledge of her unborn kits weighing down on her. However, the extra sunrises were up, and this was her last day in the medicine cat's den. She still hadn't told anyone, and she didn't plan to unless it was necessary.

The lichen entrance of the den trembled as a cat entered. Turtlefoot was relieved to see her friend, Daisystream, enter. She'd been visiting while she stayed in the medicine cat's den to keep her company.

"Hi," The white warrior mewed cheerfully. "How's your leg today?"

"It's fine," Turtlefoot sighed, stretching it carefully. "Junipertwig says I can return to warrior duties tomorrow".

"That's great!" Daisystream purred. "We can finally hunt together as warriors".

Turtlefoot nodded, her heart warming; at least there was a silver

lining to returning to warrior duties. The tortoiseshell warrior noticed that, despite Daisystream's cheerful mood, she seemed distracted. She was staring towards the den entrance, her tail tip twitching.

"Are you okay?" Turtlefoot asked curiously.

Daisystream met her gaze, excitement sparking in her eyes. "Now that Stumpleap is a warrior, we've discussed becoming mates". She explained, giving a little bounce.

"Wow, so soon?" She murmured. "Just be careful. I became mates with Rowanroot early, and look how that turned out".

The white warrior's eyes rounded sympathetically. "I know, and I'm sorry about that". She touched her nose to Turtlefoot's ear. "But all I've ever wanted was a mate and kits. That's why I couldn't wait to become a warrior. I want a family as soon as possible".

Turtlefoot nodded, unable to understand the other she-cat's need for kits. Turtlefoot was expecting kits and couldn't be more unhappy. Suddenly, an idea popped into her head, and she heaved herself to her paws excitedly. "How soon?" She asked Daisystream urgently.

The new warrior blinked, confusion clouding her gaze. "I... I don't know". She stammered. "As soon as Stumpleap agrees".

Turtlefoot hesitated, taking a deep breath. "What if I told you I was expecting kits right now?" She whispered at last.

Daisystream's eyes stretched wide and she began to purr. "That's wonderful news Turtlefoot!"

Shaking her head, Turtlefoot drew the white she-cat closer. "I don't want them. I've never wanted kits". She hissed.

"What are you going to do then?"

"Well, that's where you come in". Turtlefoot began. "If you can convince Stumpleap to have kits right now, I could give my kits to you and you could pass them off as your own".

"But... everyone would notice if you got plumper and I didn't". Daisystream murmured uncertainly.

"If we left camp soon and didn't return until after the kits were born, we could get away with it". Turtlefoot's chest tightened as she saw Daisystream starting to shake her head. "Please," She pleaded quickly. "I can't have kits. I just can't".

Daisystream sighed. "What are we going to tell the clan about why we disappeared?"

Turtlefoot's heart lifted. *Did that mean she would go along with the plan?* "We could say we were captured by twolegs! We'll go to the twoleg clearing on our territory where they come to eat sometimes. Then we'll walk through the stream until we're far from clan territory. That way they can't follow our scent trail".

"That could work". Daisystream nodded slowly. "I'll talk to Stumpleap right now".

Turtlefoot purred as she watched the young warrior slip out of the medicine cat's den. She was starting to relax when suddenly a low growl sounded from behind her. "It will never work".

She jumped as Junipertwig's voice sounded from her herb store. She'd gone out for herbs at dawn, but must've come in when Turtlefoot was sleeping. Horrified, the tortoiseshell warrior realized she had heard the whole conversation. Whipping around, she saw the gray and white she-cat glaring at her.

"So you two are going to abandon your clan because you don't want kits?" She challenged.

"We'll come back once the kits are born," Turtlefoot mewed desperately. "I can't raise kits. I'll resent them. Please Junipertwig, you can't tell anyone".

Junipertwig hesitated, then let out a sigh of defeat. "I should come with you. What if something goes wrong?"

Shocked, Turtlefoot leapt to her paws. "But you can't go, you have a new apprentice!" She mewed urgently.

At that moment, Strikepaw slid out from the herb store behind his mentor. "She's right," He mewed worriedly. "I need you here to teach me".

Hesitating, Junipertwig's gaze flicked between the two cats. At last, she nodded. "You're right. I am needed in the camp. At least let me give you some traveling herbs for your journey and strengthening herbs for kitting".

"That would be great, Junipertwig. Thank you". Turtlefoot mewed quietly. "So you won't tell anyone where we've gone or why?"

Strikepaw and Junipertwig shook their heads in unison. "It is not my place". Junipertwig said with a dip of her head.

As she returned to her herb store with the young apprentice by her side, Turtlefoot realized the huge decision she had just made. She'd decided to give up her kits and leave her clan for many moons. *This is the right decision.* She reassured herself. *I must go through with this.*

Suddenly needing fresh air, the tortoiseshell she-cat padded out of the cave where Junipertwig had her den. The lichen that covered the entrance brushed over her spine, and she relished the feeling, suddenly realizing how much she'd miss her camp. As she entered the clearing, she spotted Daisystream and Stumpleap leaving the hollow, their pelts bristling with excitement. Turtlefoot realized the white she-cat must've convinced her mate to have kits already.

Watching her go, Turtlefoot's stomach churned with anxiety. This plan needed to work, otherwise Turtlefoot didn't know what she would do. They wouldn't be able to leave until at least the half moon in order for the plan to be convincing; she hoped that was soon enough, before anybody noticed she was plumping up. With a start, she realized that she'd never asked Junipertwig how far along she was.

She turned, hurrying back into the den, and yowled for the gray and white she-cat. "Junipertwig!"

The she-cat slid out of the herb store, her eyes round with worry. "What's the matter?"

"How far along am I?" She asked urgently, glancing at her belly.

"Don't worry," Junipertwig murmured. "You're probably only half a moon along. It'll be awhile before you kit. Nobody will notice that you're expecting".

Turtlefoot closed her eyes, relief washing her pelt. "Thank Starclan".

"I hope the stress of your journey doesn't cause you to kit early. Just be careful and take it easy". Junipertwig mewed fretfully.

"Don't worry, I'll be careful". Turtlefoot murmured reassuringly. "We'll leave the day of the half moon".

"Come and get some herbs for your journey before you leave. I'll tell Lionstar that you're taking them to another medicine cat for me". Junipertwig mewed quietly. "You'll need to dry them in the sun so you can use them for your kitting".

"Thank you, Junipertwig". Turtlefoot touched the medicine cat's shoulder with her tail tip. "I'll be forever grateful to you".

Junipertwig shook herself, clearly not happy with keeping the warrior's secret. "You should return to the warrior's den now. Act like everything is normal until you leave".

Turtlefoot nodded, backing out of the den once more. She padded towards the warrior's den, glancing up as red light swathed the camp. The sun was beginning to set, and the she-cat noticed the already waning moon. It would be half moon before she knew it.

She scraped through the bramble entrance to the warrior's den and found her nest near the back of the den. Sinking into it, she basked in the stale scent of her clanmates. She'd miss sleeping in a den with all of them. Glancing at the nest next to her's, she drew in her sister's scent. She'd miss Ivysprout most of all. They had been basically inseparable as kits, and they used to do everything together. As warriors, they had grown apart, but were still very close. It would be hard to leave her, even if it was only temporary.

As if she'd been summoned, she spotted her sister's dilute

tortoiseshell pelt slipping into the warrior's den. Her eyes lit up with surprise as she noticed Turtlefoot. "Hi," She mewed happily. "I thought you wouldn't be back until tomorrow".

"Junipertwig decided I could come back early," She explained quickly. "Plus I missed you". She purred teasingly.

Ivysprout mewed with laughter. "Of course you did, you can't spend a day without me".

Turtlefoot's heart twisted as she realized she'd have to spend much more than a day without her sister, but she kept her tone light as she responded. "I really can't".

Just then the bramble entrance rustled again as Daisystream entered. She pulled her nest toward Turtlefoot's and settled down beside her. Leaning over, she hissed quietly into the tortoishell she-cat's ear. "We're good to go. When should we leave?"

Turtlefoot glanced worriedly at her sister, hoping she wouldn't overhear. But Ivysprout was engrossed in picking a pebble out of her paw pad, growling in frustration as she struggled to get it out. Satisfied that she wouldn't hear, she hissed back to Daisystream. "Half moon".

The white she-cat nodded, settling back into her nest. She tucked her nose under her paw, and soon Turtlefoot heard her gentle snores echoing across the den. More cats began slipping into the den until the nests were nearly all full. Suddenly Rowanroot entered the den, his green eyes flashing in the light. His gaze rested on her, his face twisting with pity. Rage burned beneath Turtlefoot's pelt at the look. He *pitied* her?

He padded toward her, carefully picking his way through their sleeping clanmates. He settled onto his haunches next to her, his musty scent wreathing around her. "There have been rumors going around that you stayed with Junipertwig longer to avoid me". He mewed quietly. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, but we want different things. You have to get over it".

Furious, Turtlefoot turned an icy glare on the ginger tom. "I stayed

longer because my leg hadn't healed properly. I'm not upset that we separated". She spat. "I never loved you. Especially not enough to give you kits".

Rowanroot reared back as if she'd slashed his muzzle. His eyes blazed as he stared at his former mate. "You would've been a terrible mother anyway". He hissed, stalking off to his nest with a lash of his tail.

The words stung Turtlefoot, despite the fact that she didn't want kits. She knew now more than ever that she was doing the right thing by giving the kits up. Hurt, she curled into a tight ball in her nest. She didn't need Rowanroot. She didn't need a mate at all. Even as the bitter thought entered her mind, she knew it wasn't true. An image of Graystream flashed in her mind, and she let out a small purr. Once she returned to camp, she'd tell him exactly how she felt. Maybe he would be the perfect mate for her, something Rowanroot would've never been.

Her thoughts jumbled, Turtlefoot allowed herself to relax into the soft moss surrounding her. The warmth of her clanmates and the sound of their breathing encircled her as she burrowed deeper into her nest. All of her problems seemed to melt away as weariness took over her body. Darkness crept into the edges of her vision, calling her invitingly. Gratefully she sank into the deep depths of sleep, everything else disappearing around her.

# Chapter 9

Starlingwing watched as Lavenderkit tumbled around with Plumeyes' kits. The silver she-kit was about the same age as them, and Starlingwing had wondered if she should be raised by Plumeyes instead. However, the connection she felt to the kit was too strong to ignore, and Plumeyes had confided in her that the thought of taking on another kit was exhausting. She had a large, rambunctious litter to begin with, and adding another kit to the bunch would be too much to handle.

The tabby queen's own kits were resting in her nest on the other side of the nursery. Their eyes had opened and they had begun to talk, but they still spent much of the day sleeping. They were half a moon old now, and would soon start to learn to walk on their stubby legs. For now though, they preferred to stay in their nest and watch the other kits play.

Starlingwing longed to feel the warmth of the sun on her pelt. The nursery was cramped and dusty, and Starlingwing much preferred the openness of the clearing. She slowly padded out of the nursery, relishing the feel of fresh air on her face. Though it stung with the cold of leaf-fall, Starlingwing gratefully breathed in the crisp air. Weak sunlight landed on her spine as she arched it in a stretch. The camp was bustling with cats preparing for leafbare. Apprentices were weaving fresh bracken stems into the dens while Junipertwig and Strikepaw were laying out herbs to dry in the sunlight.

A hunting patrol slipped into camp through the log tunnel, each warrior carrying prey. Though prey was growing scarcer, the patrols never failed to bring back an impressive catch. Starlingwing was glad all of the cats were plumping up before leafbare. The head of the patrol, Turtlefoot, carried a fat squirrel. She was looking especially well-fed, her belly rounded and her fur sleek. She set her catch down on the fresh-kill pile, and the rest of the patrol followed

suit. Heronlight contributed a juicy-looking thrush while Applestem set two mice on the pile. The whole patrol looked proud of their catches; only Heatherpaw hung back, her head drooping as she dropped a tiny vole next to the other catches. Starlingwing's heart burst with pity at the despair bubbling in the apprentice's eyes.

The gray and white she-cat's mentor, Heronlight, padded over to her, warmth in her gaze. She murmured comfortingly to the young apprentice, though Starlingwing was too far away to make out what she was saying. Instantly, Heatherpaw brightened, her white tail swishing happily. Heronlight led the way out of the camp once more with Heatherpaw bouncing behind her. She was likely going to give the apprentice a one-on-one hunting lesson. Starlingwing purred as she watched them go, touched by how patient Heronlight had been with her new apprentice.

Starlingwing enjoyed the activity happening around camp. She longed to be out hunting again, but knew her kits needed her here. Still, she watched her clanmates come and go wistfully. The pale moon showed white against the light blue sky. It would be half moon tonight, and the medicine cats from every clan would meet at the Star Cave.

The queen had never seen the cave herself, but Junipertwig had described it to her once. It was a large cave just outside of Alderclan territory, its mouth gaping open high above any cat's head. Inside, claw marks etched the stone walls, forming shapes that resembled the stars high above. At half moon, the cave was filled with a white glow from the stars and the moon, and the clans' ancestors would appear to speak with the medicine cats.

Shuddering, she shook the thought out of her mind. Thinking about meeting with dead clan cats made her fur crawl, and she didn't like to imagine it. Resuming her watch on the camp entrance, she pushed any thoughts of the Star Cave from her head. Another patrol was entering as Starlingwing focused her gaze on the log entrance once more. Stumpleap padded through the entrance with his littermates, Spoteye and Dustsnout, followed by Sprigleap and Beetleleg. They had been on border patrol, and by their relaxed expressions, Starlingwing guessed everything was peaceful in the pine forest.

A flash of white fur caught Starlingwing's eye, and she turned as Daisystream raced from the medicine cat's den. She skidded to a halt beside Stumpleap, her eyes glowing. She murmured something urgently in his ear, and his tail curled up happily. Starlingwing could hear him purring across the clearing as he wove around his mate. Wondering what had made them so happy, Starlingwing heaved herself to her paws, padding towards them.

"What's the celebration about?" She mewed curiously.

Daisystream turned to her, excitement lighting her face. "Junipertwig says I'm expecting kits". She mewed.

"That's great news!" Starlingwing murmured, congratulating the young couple. Personally, she thought Daisystream was way too young to be having kits. She had just become a warrior. Starlingwing had waited moons after becoming a warrior to take a mate, and then many more moons before she had decided they should have kits. Shaking out her pelt, she told herself it was none of her business. Besides, this meant her kits would have someone to play with soon.

Junipertwig padded up behind her, eyeing the new queen thoughtfully. "Perhaps you shouldn't continue with warrior duties anymore. With leafbare coming, you need to rest and keep up your strength so you can stay healthy for your kits".

Daisystream's eyes widened with dismay. "But I can't just sit around and do nothing. I need to help the clan somehow".

Starlingwing felt a wave of sympathy for the young cat. She felt the same way, cooped up in the nursery. Helping her clanmates made her feel strong and useful, and it pained her that she couldn't do that right now.

The medicine cat nodded, her eyes round with understanding. "If you really want to help, you can take these herbs to Mapleclan. It won't be too vigorous of an activity, but you'll still be helping out".

At once, Starlingwing shot to her paws. "I'll come with you! I'm dying to get out of camp".

Daisystream's eyes flared with panic, and she seemed to be having trouble responding. Before Starlingwing could ask her what was wrong, Turtlefoot's voice sounded behind her. "No, I'll go with her. You really should stay in camp with your kits, Starlingwing". She mewed smoothly.

"In case that fox is still around!" Daisystream blurted, relief entering her gaze. "Your kits need you to stay safe".

Starlingwing nodded, irritation sparking beneath her pelt. How had she not thought of that? That fox had already attacked two cats and orphaned a kit; she couldn't let that happen to her kits if it attacked her too. She understood the panic in Daisystream's eyes now. *She's going to be an excellent mother, she already has great maternal instincts.* "Good thinking". She murmured appreciatively. Dipping her head to the young queen, she turned and padded back to the nursery.

As Starlingwing entered the warm bramble den, she noticed that her kits were beginning to stir. Gladekit popped her head out of the nest first, her white fur ruffled from sleep. "Starlingwing, you're back!" She squeaked happily.

"Of course I'm back". The tabby queen purred. "I couldn't leave you four for too long".

Lavenderkit looked up from where she was still play fighting with Plumeyes's kits. "Where did you go?" She asked inquisitively.

"I just needed some fresh air". Starlingwing mewed briskly.

Slykit appeared out of the nest next, clambering over the edge and tumbling into the middle of the den. His legs wobbled beneath him, and he collapsed onto his belly with an *oof*. Starlingwing gently nosed him into a sitting position, her gaze resting on him fondly. He always had been the most adventurous of her kits.

"You know your legs can't support you properly yet". She mewed gently, nudging him back into the nest.

"But Starlingwing, I want to play with the other kits". He wailed.

"They'll never learn to use their legs if you don't let them try".

Plumeyes purred from across the clearing, her eyes bright with amusement. "Besides, I'd enjoy watching them trip over themselves".

Starlingwing hesitated, realizing the ginger queen was right. Her kits' legs would never grow strong enough to support them if they weren't exercised. Reluctantly, she nodded her head. "Very well, you can all play outside of the nest for today".

Gladekit squealed excitedly as she pulled herself out of the nest. Moss showered over her as she thumped onto the dirt floor of the den. She quickly shook it off and shakily got to her paws. Her pale white legs seemed to steady and she yowled with triumph. "I'm getting the hang of it!"

Her yowl was cut off as her brother tumbled onto her back. She mewled indignantly as he let out a mrrow of laughter. "I got you!" He squeaked, lashing his black tail in satisfaction.

"Get off of me you stupid furball!" The she-kit hissed furiously, struggling beneath her brother.

"That's enough". Starlingwing's sharp mew cut through their bickering. "If you can't behave yourselves, I'll put you back in the nest".

"We're sorry mother". The kits mewed quietly, sending apologetic glances towards Starlingwing.

Her heart melted as their bright eyes met her's. She loved her kits so much; she'd do anything to protect them. With a start, she realized that one of her kits was missing. "Is Shadowkit still in the nest?" Worry sharpened her mew as she searched for her daughter's soft black pelt among the ferns in their nest. Relief washed over her as she spotted spiky fur poking out of the shadows of the nest.

Starlingwing softly padded over to the nest and nuzzled the tiny kit. Shadowkit wasn't growing as fast as her littermates, and Junipertwig said she was worried that her difficult birth had stunted her growth. The queen quickly shook out the fear that was creeping into her mind. *Shadowkit will be fine. I just have to get her to*

*be active like Slykit, Gladekit, and Lavenderkit.* Shadowkit looked up as Starlingwing peered into the nest. He green eyes stretched wide as she saw her littermates playing outside of the nest.

"Are we allowed out now?" She mewed eagerly.

Starlingwing nodded. "So long as you behave yourselves, you can play outside of the nest all day".

Shadowkit tentatively pulled herself onto the edge of the nest, staring down at the ground as if it were tail lengths away. Purring in amusement, Starlingwing gently grabbed her scruff and lowered her onto the floor.

"I could've gotten down myself!" Shadowkit mewled in protest.

"I know dear, I just wanted to help".

Shadowkit quickly shook her off and wobbled over to her littermates. She was much smaller than them, and Starlingwing flinched every time the tiny black kit fell over. It was hard for her not to intervene as the kits wrestled with each other.

Plumeyes padded over, a sympathetic look in her eyes. "I know it's hard for you to let Shadowkit play rough, but it'll toughen her up in the long run. She's not as delicate as she seems".

As she said this, Shadowkit pounced on her brother, pummeling his belly with her small paws. She squealed in delight as he struggled beneath her. "Okay, I give up, you win!" Slykit meowed grumpily. "Now get off, you're crushing me". He complained.

Starlingwing let out a purr as she realized Plumeyes was right. Shadowkit was growing stronger everyday, and she was just as capable as her littermates. She let herself relax as her kits continued to play. Lavenderkit pattered over and started trying to teach them the hunter's crouch as they played. Relieved to see all four of her kits happy and healthy, Starlingwing allowed herself to curl up in her nest and rest for a bit.

She was awoken by the sound of worried voices coming from the clearing. Sitting up, she turned her ears towards the den entrance to

try and catch what the cats were saying. Lionstar was there, as well as Poppyfoot, Elkgust, Stumpleap, and Ivysprout. Curious, the tabby queen slipped through the bramble entrance and into the camp clearing. The cats she had heard talking were clustered with their heads close together. Russettail and Astertuft paced nearby, while Sprucesky sat staring at the camp entrance expectantly. Starlingwing could smell Cloudrun, Leafstorm, and Frogclaw, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"What's going on?" Jayflight's mew startled her, and she turned to see him slipping from the nursery behind her. He must've come to visit his mate and kits while Starlingwing was asleep.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure, let's go ask".

"What's all the commotion about?" Starlingwing asked as they neared the gathered cats.

Russettail paused her pacing and faced Starlingwing. "Daisystream and Turtlefoot have gone missing. They never returned from taking herbs to Mapleclan and it's almost dark. Turtlefoot just had a run in with that fox that's been lurking around here. What if it attacks them again?"

"And Daisystream is expecting my kits!" Stumpleap growled, ripping at the ground with his claws. "What if something happens to her?"

"I've already sent out a search party". Lionstar raised his voice above the clamber. "Cloudrun, Leafstorm, and Frogclaw are searching our territory. Tomorrow I will send patrols to the other clans if they still haven't returned. There's nothing more we can do tonight but wait for the search party to return".

As he spoke, the log tunnel creaked as a cat entered camp. Sprucesky leapt to his paws, hope sparking in his gaze. His look turned to disappointment as the search party padded into the camp. Cloudrun shook his head, grief clouding his eyes. "We didn't find them. We followed their scent trail heading towards the Mapleclan border, but we lost it once we reached the twoleg clearing with the stream. We think something may have happened to them there; they never even reached Mapleclan".

Starlingwing hung her head, and Jayflight bristled next to her. "Let's send out another search party! We have to find my sister".

Lionstar shook his head gently. "It's almost dark, we must wait until morning. I will send out another search party then and have a patrol go to each clan".

"What if we don't find them?" Ivysprout fretted.

"Don't worry," Elkgust growled. "We will".

The gathered cats looked distraught as they padded off to their dens. Starlingwing's belly felt hollow as she thought of her missing clanmates. She shuddered as a thought entered her mind. *What if we* never *find them?*

# Chapter 10

Daisystream's heart pounded as she padded out of camp with Turtlefoot, knowing this was the last time she'd see any of her clanmates for awhile. Their journey had become even more difficult when Junipertwig told her she actually was expecting Stumpleap's kits. The medicine cat had advised her not to go, since raising two litters herself would be very challenging. The kits would also be about a moon apart, so it might be hard to disguise their different ages from her clanmates.

Still, the desperation in Turtlefoot's eyes when she'd told her the news that she might not go had broken Daisystream's heart. She'd decided to go through with the plan after all, and they'd deal with any issues as they came up. Today they were leaving clan territory, and Daisystream couldn't have been more scared.

Turtlefoot turned to her, a wad of herbs clamped in her jaws. "Are you sure about this?" She asked, her mew muffled.

Daisystream nodded, her mouth too full of herbs to respond. She couldn't wait to reach the twoleg clearing so they could eat the traveling herbs. Then they'd have less herbs to carry, and it would be easier to breathe and talk. Daisystream wondered how Turtlefoot was handling the herbs in her mouth so well, especially with her kits weighing her down. The tortoiseshell she-cat had already grown plump, and Daisystream was glad none of their clanmates had questioned why.

The two she-cats weaved through the undergrowth, pine needles crunching underneath their paws. Daisystream glanced up at the pine trees soaring high above, their boughs spread out like a shield from rain, snow, and wind. She loved the pine forest, and her heart twisted at the thought of leaving it for so long. She pushed away the doubt forming in her mind; her friend needed her, and she was determined to help her as much as she could.

Daisystream was relieved that Junipertwig had told the clan they were delivering herbs to Mapleclan. The twoleg clearing was between Pineclan's camp and Mapleclan's border, so it would be expected that they'd pass through it on their way to the other clan. She had been alarmed when Starlingwing had offered to come with her, but Turtlefoot had handled the situation effortlessly. She admired the tortoiseshell warrior's cunningness; it was one of the virtues Lionstar had mentioned during her warrior ceremony, and now it was proving useful.

As they skirted a large bramble bush, the twoleg clearing came into sight. The chattering of the stream reached Daisystream's ears, and her breath caught in her throat as she realized they were about to leave their clan for moons. She froze, her paws seemingly stuck to the ground. How could she leave everything she'd ever known? Her kin, friends, and den were all here. She didn't know anything outside of Pineclan territory. There could be many unknown dangers out there, and with leafbare coming they might not be able to find shelter or food.

Turtlefoot paused as if she'd realized Daisystream was no longer behind her. She turned, her green eyes bright with fear. "I'm scared too. We don't know what we'll find beyond clan territory. But we can do this Daisystream. We were raised by the fiercest clan in the forest; we can survive by ourselves for a couple moons. So are you coming, or not?"

Daisystream nodded, new found determination flowing through her. "I'm coming". She quickly caught up to Turtlefoot as they padded the last few tail lengths to the twoleg clearing.

They paused by the stream and set down their herb bundles. Daisystream nudged a bundle of traveling herbs to Turtlefoot and lapped up her own. She screwed up her face as the bitter juices flowed into her mouth. Shuddering, she quickly swallowed and swiped her tongue around her mouth. "Yuck!" She spat.

Turtlefoot's tail trembled as she swallowed hers, shaking her head as if she was trying to clear the taste from her mouth. "What are we, rabbits?"

Daisystream meowed in amusement as she scooped up the kitting herbs Junipertwig had given them. It was a relief to have a smaller bundle to carry, and her jaws relaxed. "Ready?" She glanced at Turtlefoot, glad to find it easier to talk.

Turtlefoot nodded. "Ready."

Together the she-cats tentatively climbed into the stream. Daisystream shivered as the freezing water flowed over her paws. She was relieved to find that it wasn't deep here, and barely covered her paws. She followed Turtlefoot as she padded down the stream, walking against the current. Daisystream carefully picked her way around rocks jutting out from the stream bed. She winced as gravel pricked her paw pads, and was glad that Junipertwig had given them some dock leaves in case they cracked or scratched them.

"We should travel until sunset, then find somewhere to shelter for the night". Turtlefoot called out from in front of her.

"Maybe we should rest before then. You might get tired from the extra weight you're carrying". Daisystream replied tentatively.

Turtlefoot turned her head, glaring at Daisystream. "Expecting kits has not made me weak". She growled. "We'll travel until sunset".

Daisystream sighed, knowing their was no arguing with Turtlefoot. "Fine, we'll travel until sunset".

Raising her nose to sniff the air, Daisystream realized they were passing Pineclan scent markers. They must've just crossed the border; they were officially out of clan territory. Taking a deep breath to steady her breathing, she glanced around at their surrounding. The pine trees continued this far, but they were beginning to thin. Daisystream's heart sank; she'd hoped they'd be able to shelter under them for one more night.

Daisystream noticed birch trees beginning to mingle with the pines, and soon birch forests rose up on either side of the stream. They had left the pines behind by now, and Daisystream was already beginning to miss the smell of pine sap and the crunch of the

needles under her paws. However, the scenery here was beautiful as well, and Daisystream found herself enjoying the smell of the wildflowers that sprouted on the stream banks. Tiny purple and white flowers dotted the landscape, and the birch branches rattled in the wind. The leaves on the trees were already brown, and many of them were beginning to flutter to the ground.

The clear blue sky and weak sunlight gave Daisystream hope that this leafbare would be mild. Leaf-fall had been warm despite the rain, and she started to think that maybe they'd be okay living on their own after all. A mild leafbare would mean easier prey and warmer shelter.

As if Turtlefoot had read her mind, she paused and turned to Daisystream. "I'm surprised the weather is so nice with leafbare coming. Maybe the cold season will be bearable this time".

"Hopefully. Leafbare is not the best time to have kits, especially since we're going to have to fend for ourselves". Daisystream murmured nervously. "Maybe we should turn back. This was a dumb decision. How are we supposed to protect ourselves and two litters of kits through an entire leafbare? We can't do it".

Panic flared in Turtlefoot's eyes and she stopped abruptly. "Please Daisystream, don't turn back now. If you left I don't know what I'd do. These kits need someone who will actually care about them and raise them with gentleness and kindness; I can't give them that. I've never wanted kits and I don't have a maternal bone in my body. Please".

Daisystream hesitated, her heart aching at the sadness thickening Turtlefoot's mew. She couldn't abandon her friend, not when she was desperate and carrying kits. "Okay," She mewed at last. "I won't turn back. We'll see this plan through".

Turtlefoot sighed in relief. "Thank you, Daisystream. We'll be okay, you'll see. We'll find somewhere safe to shelter during leafbare and I'll hunt for us every day".

"Maybe we should find somewhere to shelter now. My paws are frozen numb". Daisystream muttered crossly, shaking out each of

her paws. Sparkling water droplets spun away as she shook. She hated the feel of water in her fur; cats were not meant to get wet.

Turtlefoot shook her head. "We're not far enough away from clan territory. We'll travel until it gets dark, then we can find somewhere to rest. Don't worry, sunset isn't far off, we'll stop before you know it".

The two she-cats padded through the stream until it got too dark to continue. They clambered onto the shore, shaking out their fur on the bank. They rested there for the night, sheltering underneath a holly bush. Then they had resumed their journey in the morning, reentering the stream. It got so deep that they had to swim in parts, and Daisystream was glad the current wasn't strong. They traveled for three more sunrises, stopping every night to rest, until they were sure that no clan cats would be able to find them. The two she-cats hauled themselves out of the stream, shaking water from their pelts and looking around at their surroundings.

"Maybe we should set up camp here. It seems safe, and we could shelter underneath the blackberry bushes over there". She angled her ears towards a large swath of bushes underneath the birch trees, a couple of tail lengths from the stream. "There's a gap big enough for us to fit through, but small enough that predators can't get in".

Turtlefoot followed her gaze to the blackberry bushes. "That could work". She mewed thoughtfully. "And there seems to be plenty of prey around here as well as fresh water".

"The sun is starting to set anyway, and I'm too tired to travel any further". Daisystream pointed out. "We're probably far enough away from the clans by now".

"That's true". Turtlefoot nodded. "Okay, we'll set up camp here. I'll gather moss and bracken for nests, and you can see if there's any prey around here".

Daisystream agreed and darted off into the forest, her nose low to the ground and ears pricked for any prey sounds. The birch trees had continued down the stream, and were dotted here and there with beech trees. She wove through the spindly trees in search of

prey. Suddenly she stopped, lifting her nose to scent the air. Her hackles started to raise as she scented rogue, but she forced them to flatten as she realized there was no sign of cat nearby. She walked deeper into the forest, alert for any signs of prey.

A blackbird called high above her head, and she glanced up in time to see it take off from a branch, beating it's wings. The orange leaves rustled as the bird flew through them, and some showered down onto Daisystream's pelt. Suddenly feeling like a kit again, she pounced on one of the falling leaves. It crunched beneath her paws as she landed on it and she purred in amusement.

"Nice catch," A sarcastic mew sounded from somewhere behind her. "Maybe next time you could try catching some real prey".

Daisystream whipped around, her pelt prickling in alarm. The smell of rogue floated to her nose again, and she chided herself for not paying attention to the scent earlier. She searched the darkening undergrowth, and at last saw two yellow eyes peering out from underneath a yew bush. A thin black tom padded out from underneath it, an amused look on his face.

"I was just playing". Daisystream mewed ruefully, raising her head in defiance. "It's none of your business what I do".

The black tom shrugged. "Okay, don't mind me then. I just thought I might give you some helpful hunting tips".

Daisystream snorted. "I don't need any tips. I'm an excellent hunter, thank you very much".

"I don't doubt that, it's just that you're clearly not from around here". The tom mewed, eyeing her curiously.

Daisystream stiffened. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, if you *were* from around here, you'd know that prey is lousy in this area. You want to hunt on the other side of that hollow". He nodded toward a nearby dip in the ground surrounded by birch trees. "Prey runs much better over there".

"Oh..." Daisystream stuttered, suddenly feeling dumb for being so

rude. "Thank you, that's really kind of you".

The tom dipped his head. "No problem. You probably need extra prey for those kits that you're carrying".

Daisystream turned her head sharply, staring at the tom through narrowed eyes. "How did you know I was expecting kits?"

"Queens usually have a different smell. I noticed it when my mate was expecting kits. You have that same smell".

Relaxing, Daisystream sat down, wrapping her tail neatly over her paws. "I see. How many kits do you have?"

The black tom's eyes clouded with grief. "None. My mate and only kit disappeared moons ago. Another rogue told me he thought he'd seen my mate get struck by a monster, and couldn't find my kit; we hadn't even named her yet, we were stuck coming up with one for so long. I vowed to never live near another thunderpath, and got as far away from there as I could. I found this place and settled down. It's quiet here, and there usually aren't a lot of other cats, so I keep to myself".

"I'm so sorry". Daisystream murmured quietly. "I don't want to disturb you. If you'd like, my friend and I can settle in another area".

The tom shook his head. "No, you shouldn't travel too far when you're expecting kits. It might make you kit early, which is dangerous. I don't mind you staying here, it might be nice to have someone to talk to. You said you had a friend?"

Daisystream nodded. "Yes, Turtlefoot and I traveled here together. She's collecting materials for our nests".

"Turtlefoot," The black tom mewed in confusion. "What a strange name. She sounds like one of those "clan" cats that lives downstream from here".

"Well, we actually *are* from the groups that live downstream".

The tom's eyes grew wide with shock. "What're you doing down

here if you live in those groups?"

"It's a long story". Daisystream mewed, glancing down at her paws in discomfort. "Maybe I'll tell you another time".

"Okay," The tom agreed. "Sounds good. I'm Spider, by the way".

"I'm Daisystream". She dipped her head in greeting. "I should be getting back to Turtlefoot. She'll be worried if I don't return before dark".

"Wait, let me help you hunt first. I feel bad that I interrupted and you shouldn't have to return empty pawed because of me". Spider mewed, his eyes pleading.

"Okay, lead the way". Daisystream nodded. She guessed that Spider was enjoying the company of another cat after being alone for so long.

She followed the black tom as he padded through the quickly darkening forest. They reached the other side of the clearing quickly, and Spider paused, holding up his tail to signal for Daisystream to do the same. The white she-cat stopped next to him, keeping all of her senses alert for prey.

Soon she heard a small scuffling sound by the roots of a nearby birch, and saw beady eyes gleaming in the dying light. The scent of mouse wafted towards her, making her mouth water. Daisystream turned towards Spider to notify him, and was startled to find that he had disappeared. Confused, she searched for his black pelt among the undergrowth, but couldn't spot him anywhere.

Suddenly a flash of movement from above caught Daisystream's attention. She jerked her head up as Spider flew out of a birch tree, landing neatly on the mouse. Its shrill shriek was cut off as Spider sank his teeth into it and gave it a good shake. He padded towards her, dropping the still warm mouse at her paws.

"Wow," Daisystream breathed. "How did you manage to climb the tree so silently?"

Spider's eyes twinkled in the light. "Maybe I'll show you someday.

Here, take the mouse. You should get back to your friend before dark. It's too dangerous to be out alone at night".

He turned without waiting for a reply and bounded into the forest, his black pelt melting into the shadows. Daisystream watched him go, still in awe at his amazing catch. She picked up the mouse, its scent filling her nose and making her belly rumble. She headed back towards the blackberry bushes, her mind filled with thoughts of her strange meeting. *Where did this strange cat come from?*

# Chapter 11

Turtlefoot paced impatiently in front of the blackberry bushes. *Where is Daisystream?* It was almost dark and Turtlefoot hadn't seen her since she'd left to go find prey. Her heart pounded as she waited for her friend, wondering if something had happened to her. As the sun sank below the horizon and darkness covered the forest, Turtlefoot's anxiety grew. Daisystream wouldn't stay out this late unless something bad had happened.

Her belly swung beneath her as she paced, and she hissed in annoyance. Already her kits were getting in the way; Turtlefoot couldn't be more relieved that she wouldn't have to raise them. It was like Rowanroot had said: she would be a terrible mother. Her heart clenched as she thought of her former mate and the harsh words he had said to her the last time they spoke. *Would I really have been a terrible mother?* She quickly pushed the thought out of her head. It didn't matter, she'd never be a mother after all.

She was preparing to leave the makeshift den to search for Daisystream when she heard a rustle in the bushes. Rogue scent touched her nose and she whipped around, fluffing out her fur to make herself appear bigger. Relief washed over her as Daisystream's white pelt appeared from underneath a dense briar bush.

"Where have you been? I've been worried". She hissed. Daisystream's scent mingled with rogue scent, and Turtlefoot stared at her curiously. "Were you with a rogue?"

Daisystream's pelt bristled in embarrassment. "I met a tom named Spider. He told me the best places to hunt and caught this mouse for us!"

Turtlefoot stared at the mouse Daisystream had dropped at her paws. It was plump for a leaf-fall mouse, but it was bathed in rogue

stench. Although Turtlefoot's stomach was grumbling, she turned her nose up at the prey. "It stinks of rogue". She growled. "I'm not eating it".

Daisystream's eyes widened in dismay. "You have to eat, your kits are growing every day!"

"They're not my kits". Turtlefoot reminded her.

"Even more of a reason to eat this mouse". The white she-cat hissed. "They're my kits, and I want them to come out healthy".

Taken aback by the usually gentle she-cat's fierceness, Turtlefoot was at a loss for words. Without saying anything, she slowly crouched by the mouse and choked down a few mouthfuls. After she'd eaten her share, she sat back, glad that her stomach had stopped rumbling.

"Thanks". She muttered.

Daisystream shrugged. "Thank Spider when you meet him".

"I'm going to meet him?" Turtlefoot stared at Daisystream incredulously as the white she-cat scarfed down the rest of the mouse.

She finished eating before answering, and began cleaning her whiskers as she spoke. "Well, he lives in this forest, so I assume we'll run into him while we're staying here".

"I suppose". Turtlefoot grumbled. The idea of sharing territory with a rogue made her shudder. Pineclan had never taken in rogues before, and the cats were always appalled when other clans did.

"Oh Turtlefoot, rogues aren't our enemies. Just because our clan doesn't accept them doesn't mean they're bad cats. Lionstar accepted Lavenderkit even though she was a rogue kit". Daisystream reminded her.

Turtlefoot shook her head. "That's different. She was a defenseless kit whose mother was killed by a fox. If we hadn't taken her in she would've died".

"Well Spider's mate and kit were killed by a monster. I think he's lonely. Would it be so terrible to  show him a little kindness?"

Turtlefoot hesitated, feeling awkward. She couldn't imagine what it would feel like to lose her family. *Maybe I shouldn't have been so quick to judge him just because he's a rogue.* "I suppose we could spend some time with him while we're staying here". She muttered.

Daisystream's tail curled up happily. "Good! You'll like him, trust me. He's nice, funny, and sarcastic like you".

Turtlefoot meowed in amusement. "Alright, I'll try to be nice. But for tonight, let's just get some sleep. I'm exhausted, and the comfy nests I made us are waiting inside the den".

Following Daisystream, Turtlefoot squeezed through the gap in the blackberry bushes. She'd been pleased to discover that the gap widened into a large hole in the center of the bush. There was almost as much space in the bush as there was in the warrior's den.

After collecting materials, Turtlefoot had woven two nests out of bracken. She'd dug two holes in the ground near each other and placed the nests in the holes. Then she'd lined each nest with ferns and moss to add extra warmth and padding. To Turtlefoot's surprise, she'd been able to find fresh, green ferns. She'd expected all of them to be browning because of leaf-fall, but they'd been alive, giving her fresh hope that leafbare would be mild this season.

"These are great, thanks Turtlefoot". Daisystream said through a huge yawn. "Let's get some sleep. We can hunt more in the morning and perhaps reinforce the den roof".

Turtlefoot nodded, exhaustion weighing her paws down. It had been a long trek through the stream and the added weight of her kits had drained her energy. She slowly curled up in her nest, struggling to get comfortable because of her rounded belly.

Daisystream must've noticed her discomfort because her eyes rounded with sympathy. "I'll catch a bird tomorrow and put the feathers in your nest. That should make it comfier". As Turtlefoot

started to protest, Daisystream interrupted her. "Just let me take care of you for the last moon of your pregnancy. You're carrying my kits and I want you to be as healthy as possible, which includes getting plenty of sleep".

"You're carrying kits too". Turtlefoot reminded her, irritation sparking beneath her pelt. "And I don't need anyone to take care of me. This is why I don't want kits; everyone treats queens like they're weak and can't look after themselves".

Daisystream opened her mouth to reply, then seemed to think better of it. With a huff, the white she-cat turned around in her nest and laid down. Soon she was snoring softly, her flank rising and falling as she breathed. Turtlefoot sighed, her pelt crawling with guilt. Maybe she had been too harsh towards her friend. *I'll apologize in the morning.* She vowed, allowing herself to drift off into sleep.

Turtlefoot woke with a start as a furious hiss came from outside the blackberry bushes. Sunlight was streaming in through the blackberry branches above, and Daisystream still lay sleeping in her nest. Confused Turtlefoot slowly got to her paws and poked her head out of the bushes. Two voices could be heard arguing nearby, and Turtlefoot slipped out of the den to investigate. She followed the voices to the bank of the stream and spotted two cats facing each other, hackles lifted.

Shock pulsed through Turtlefoot's body as she recognized Petalface, Lionstar's secret mate from Mapleclan. Her belly was rounded with his kits and she was standing over a dead vole. A black tom that Turtlefoot didn't recognize stood facing her, his yellow eyes narrowed into slits. Turtlefoot quickly hurried forward, her confusion growing. *What is Petalface doing here?*

"This is my vole!" Petalface's growl reached Turtlefoot's ears as she neared the two cats.

"I don't want your vole!" The tom hissed. "I just want to get past you so I can have a drink of water".

"I can see you eyeing it! You're going to steal it the moment I let

you past". The brown and white she-cat yowled, unsheathing her claws.

"What's going on?" Turtlefoot meowed as she reached them.

Both cats whirled around to face her as she spoke. Petalface's fur bushed out even more as her eyes landed on Turtlefoot. "I'll fight you both if I have to". She growled, though her voice wavered.

"We're not going to steal your food, I don't even know this cat". Turtlefoot mewed calmly, flicking her ears toward the black tom. "Don't you recognize me, Petalface?"

"Are you a clan cat?" Petalface asked in confusion, her eyes clouding. "How do you know my name?"

"I'm Turtlefoot of Pineclan". She explained quickly. "I met you once at a gathering". She hesitated, wondering if she should mention Lionstar. *I'll ask her about it later.*

"Right, I remember you now!" She mewed, her eyes brightening. "It's so nice to find another clan cat".

The black tom stepped forward, his eyes gleaming as he stared at Turtlefoot. "You're Daisystream's friend! I met her yesterday and she told me all about you".

"Then you must be Spider". Turtlefoot mewed, her tone cool. She still didn't trust rogues, no matter how friendly he seemed.

"Well *Spider* here was trying to steal my vole". Petalface mewed indignantly.

Spider huffed, rolling his eyes. "I was not. I'm just trying to get some water".

"Spider wouldn't steal your prey, Petalface. He can hunt for himself. He even caught me and Daisystream a mouse yesterday". Turtlefoot mewed soothingly. "Thank you for that". She mewed cautiously, turning to Spider.

He dipped his head politely. "It was nothing".

Petalface took a step back from the stream, snatching up her vole as she went. "Fine". She mumbled to Spider. "Go ahead". Spider padded past her, his fur spiking up in annoyance. He lapped at the water, sending sparking droplets spinning into the air.

Turning to Turtlefoot, Petalface's eyes glinted suspiciously. "What are you and Daisystream doing so far away from clan territory?"

"I could ask you the same thing". Turtlefoot retorted.

Sadness entered Petalface's gaze, and she sat down with a thump. "I don't think I should say, especially since you're a Pineclan cat".

Turtlefoot sighed heavily. "I know about you and Lionstar". She confessed. "I saw you together when you told him you were expecting kits. I was coming to find him to discuss the fox on our territory". She lied quickly, hoping Petalface believed her.

Panic flashed through Petalface's eyes. "Does anybody else know?"

"Only Daisystream, and we both agreed not to tell anybody else. We want to protect the reputation of our clan".

Spider had returned by now and was listening, interest sparking in his gaze. "Who's Lionstar?" He asked curiously.

Petalface rounded on him, her fur bristling with fury. "It's not really any of your business". She hissed.

"We might as well tell him, it's not like he's going to tell any clan cats; he's a rogue". Turtlefoot pointed out. Without waiting for a response from Petalface, she turned to Spider. "Lionstar is the leader of my clan, Pineclan. It's one of the groups that lives downstream. The clans have a code that we're supposed to follow called the Warrior Code, and part of the code is that you can't take a mate from another clan".

"It's a ridiculous code". Petalface hissed. "I should be able to become mates with whoever I please".

"So you and Lionstar are mates, even though you're not supposed to be". Spider mewed slowly. "I get it now. But that still doesn't explain

why you're here".

"Well, I asked Lionstar if I could join Pineclan; I thought it would be nice to have our kits in a clan where we could both raise them". Her voice quivered as she continued. "But he refused. He said he didn't want to jeopardize his role as leader or destroy his family. I decided then that clan life was too hard and unfair, so I left. I'm never returning. My kits and I are going to live as kittypets from now on, I just need to find a home far away from the clans". She finished firmly.

"Why would you want to be a kittypet?" Turtlefoot asked in astonishment. "And you're just going to abandon your clan?"

Petalface bared her teeth. "Isn't that what you're doing? Why else would you be out here?"

"It's a long story". Turtlefoot murmured, taking a step back.

"I told you my reason for leaving. It's your turn". Petalface pointed out.

Turtlefoot opened her mouth to reply, but before she could, she heard a voice calling her name. She turned to see Daisystream slipping through the reeds on the stream bank, looking around for her. Her eyes rounded in surprise as she spotted Turtlefoot with Spider and Petalface, and she raced to meet them.

"What happened here?" She asked, bewildered.

Turtlefoot quickly brought her up to speed on Petalface's predicament, and Daisystream gave the brown and white she-cat a soothing lick around the ears. "Don't worry". She murmured. "You don't need him. You'll be a great mother all on your own".

Petalface purred, leaning against the white she-cat. "Thanks, Daisystream. You'll be a terrific mother as well. And you too, Turtlefoot".

Shifting uncomfortably, Turtlefoot shook her head. "Actually, I'm not going to be a mother. That's why we're here. I'm giving Daisystream my kits once they're born, and then we'll return to our

clans where she'll raise them with her own kits".

"What? You're giving your kits away? How could you do that?" Petalface gasped.

"I don't want kits, and I don't want them to grow up with a mother who resents them. I'm doing what's best for them". Turtlefoot mewed quietly.

An awkward silence hung over the four cats, seeming to stretch for seasons. Finally, Daisystream shook out her white pelt. "So, Petalface, you're going to be a kittypet. I wonder what that'll be like".

"I bet it will be wonderful". Petalface purred. "My kits and I will never go cold and I'll never have to hunt for my food again".

"I wonder which twoleg place your kits will go to when they're born". Spider wondered aloud.

Petalface's whiskers twitched in confusion. "What do you mean? They'll stay with me and my twolegs".

Spider seemed to shrink under his pelt as he shook his head. "No... they won't. When a kittypet has kits, the twolegs give them away to other twolegs. They don't let you keep them".

"What?" Petalface squealed. "How do you know that?"

"I had a rogue friend once who was expecting kits. She decided that it would be safer if her kits were kittypets so they wouldn't freeze or starve during leafbare. A couple moons later, I visited her new twoleg den to see how the kits were doing. She was distraught and told me the twolegs had given them away when they were just two moons old. She never saw them again". Spider explained quietly.

"I can't let that happen to my kits!" Petalface mewed, her face panicked. "They need to all stay together and be raised by their mother".

"Then don't become a kittypet, go back to your clan". Turtlefoot urged, confused as to why the she-cat wanted to be a kittypet

anyway.

"I can't, I'm done with clan life and with living in the wild. It's a difficult life; being a kittypet sounds much easier. I'd be warm all the time, there'd always be food to eat, and twolegs love cats. I'm going to be a kittypet no matter what it takes".

"But what about your kits?" Daisystream mewed worriedly. "You can't let them be separated from you and each other".

Petalface hesitated, seeming to struggle getting her next words out. Finally, she took a deep breath. "Will you take them?"

# Chapter 12

Starlingwing watched anxiously from the mouth of the nursery for the last patrol to return. Lionstar had sent a group of cats to every clan to ask if they'd seen Daisystream and Turtlefoot, but so far there had been no luck. Only Mapleclan had reported anything, saying that one of their clanmates was missing as well. Petalface, an expecting queen, had disappeared the sunrise after the other two cats. Lionstar had seemed particularly shaken up about the queen's disappearance, which baffled Starlingwing. Why did he care so much about a cat from another clan?

Shaking it off, Starlingwing realized he must just be worried about why the cats were disappearing. Would anyone else disappear? Starlingwing shuddered at the thought, and quickly glanced over at her kits. She heaved a sigh of relief as she spotted all four of them playing near their nest. Lavenderkit squealed as the three smaller kits piled on top of her, and Starlingwing purred in amusement. She suddenly remembered Strikepaw's dream, and worry wormed beneath her pelt. She'd tried not to think about Lavenderkit's destiny, but it kept nagging at the back of her mind. How was her small kit supposed to save the entire clan?

Starlingwing turned as the brambles around the camp entrance rustled, and Frogclaw slipped through the log tunnel, followed by Rowanroot and Ivysprout. Russettail raced forward, her tail raised hopefully, only for it to droop as Frogclaw shook his head. Starlingwing couldn't hear what he was saying, but she could tell that Alderclan had not seen any sign of the missing she-cats either.

Disappointed, she heaved herself to her paws and padded toward the freshkill pile. She quickly snagged a shrew off the top and took it back into the nursery. She settled down in her nest and began gnawing on the scrawny piece of prey. Leafbare was growing closer, and would be upon them any day now. The prey was starting to grow scrawny and the undergrowth was beginning to brown. As she tore a chunk off, she heard Lavenderkit's voice behind her.

"Hi," The silver she-kit mewed. "Who are you?"

Confused, Starlingwing turned to see who she was talking to. She stared in bewilderment at the kit, who was standing facing the wall of the den. Her eyes were clouded as if she were zoned out, and she stared off into the distance.

"Lavenderkit? Who are you talking to?" Starlingwing called quietly.

But the she-kit took no notice of her foster mom, continuing to stare at the wall. "I'm Lavenderkit". She paused as if listening to a reply, then began talking again. "Yes, I live in the clans. You don't?"

Starlingwing leapt to her paws, panic and bewilderment spiking through her body. "Lavenderkit!" She mewed sharply.

The kit jumped, seemingly startled, and turned around. "Did I do something wrong, Starlingwing?"

"Who were you talking to?" She demanded.

"I was having a vision!" The kit announced proudly. "At least that's what Spider called it. He's who I was talking to. He said he doesn't live in the clans, but he's met some cats who do. I don't know how I could hear him. Everything went dark, and then I could hear his voice, but I couldn't see anything but his eyes. Could you hear him?"

Starlingwing swayed on her paws, her mind whirling with confusion. "No... no I didn't hear him". She mewed tentatively. "Do you want to take a trip outside of the den? We can go see Junipertwig".

"Okay, that sounds like fun!" She squeaked. "I love being in Junipertwig's den, she tells the best stories".

Starlingwing led the way out of the den, her paws shaking. *How is my kit having visions? Is this part of her destiny?* She wondered to herself as she padded across the clearing. Her father, Owlsneeze, waved his tail in greeting as they passed the elder's den, but she barely even noticed. Her mind was focused on getting her kit to the medicine cat's den; she needed to know why she was having

visions.

As the reached the small cave on the other side of the clearing, she heard a low moan coming from inside. She halted, wondering if she should go in if there was an injured cat inside. Then Stumpleap's voice floated to her ears. "I just can't sleep with her missing. I'm so tired I feel like my paws are going to fall off, but I can't fall asleep. Every time I do I have nightmares of something happening to her, like her kitting early or getting attacked by a fox. What do I do?"

"Here, eat some poppy seeds and try to rest in this nest. I'll tell Lionstar you can't do warrior duties today". Junipertwig mewed. "Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find her soon".

Starlingwing thought she heard a trace of doubt in the medicine cat's mew as she said this. *Does she doubt that we'll find them?* Starlingwing wondered, her heart fluttering with anxiety. They had only been missing for a couple of sunrises, surely they would show up soon?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Lavenderkit tugging on her tail. "Are we going in or not?" She mewed impatiently.

"Yes dear, but Stumpleap isn't feeling well so we have to be quiet and respectful when we go in, okay?"

The silver she-kit nodded solemnly, clamping her jaws shut as Starlingwing led her inside. Stumpleap was curled up in a nearby nest tossing and turning, his discomfort obvious. Strikepaw slipped out of the herb store, a leaf wrap clamped in his jaws. He gently set it by Stumpleap and unrolled it to reveal a few poppy seeds.

"Here, eat these". He murmured gently.

Stumpleap obeyed, and was soon slumped over in the nest, fast asleep. Strikepaw noticed Starlingwing and Lavenderkit and hurried over to meet them. "Is everything alright?"

Starlingwing nodded. "Physically, we're fine. But Lavenderkit just had a vision while she was awake. She said she was talking to a cat named Spider who lives outside the clans. What does this mean?"

Strikepaw's face grew puzzled, and he shook his head. "I'm not sure. Let me fetch Junipertwig".

The black and white tom turned and padded to the back of the cave. He stuck his head into the opening of the herb store and called for his mentor. Junipertwig's gray head popped out of the opening, her blue eyes shining with concern.

"You had a vision?" She asked Lavenderkit gently. "Can you tell me about it?"

Lavenderkit nodded, her fur ruffled uncomfortably. "I was just playing in the nursery, and then everything got dark. I couldn't see anything except for this cat's yellow eyes, and I could hear him talking to me too. He said his name was Spider and he lives away from the clans. He started to say something else but then Starlingwing called me and the vision ended".

Junipertwig's face screwed up with concentration; she was clearly trying to figure out what the strange vision meant. Finally, she shook her head and fixed Lavenderkit with a stern stare. "I don't know why you had a vision, but I do know that Lionstar would not be happy about you conversing with a cat outside the clans. If you begin to have another vision, you must try your hardest to shut it off".

Lavenderkit dropped her head in disappointment. "Okay, I'll try". She mewed quietly.

"Now go back to the nursery, I want to talk to Starlingwing alone. See if your siblings want to play toss the moss". Junipertwig said more brightly.

"Okay! Slykit always wins, but I'll win this time!" The gray kit mewed determinedly, rushing out of the den.

As soon as she was gone, Junipertwig turned to Starlingwing. "I don't know who Spider is or what he wants with the clans or Lavenderkit, but I know no good can come out of it. He could want to hurt the clans or steal our territory. He could even be the reason that cats have been disappearing. Whatever you do, don't let

Lavenderkit talk to him again".

Starlingwing gulped nervously and nodded her head. "I won't let her, don't worry".

Shaking slightly, Starlingwing padded out of the den and absentmindedly made her way across the clearing. She found herself nestled behind the nursery, where she went when she needed a place to think. Her paws trembled as she tucked them underneath herself and settled onto her belly. Looking around, she spotted her kits playing toss the moss outside of the elder's den. Owlsneeze kept batting the moss out of the air and holding it above the kits' heads, where they couldn't reach. She purred in amusement as Slykit bowled the elder over, snagging the moss out of his grasp and scampering away. Owlsneeze pretended to be injured, rolling around on the ground moaning. The kits giggled and prodded him with their paws until he leaped back up, feigning anger and chasing them around.

Thankful for the distraction, Starlingwing let her eyes narrow to slits. She leaned against the wall of the nursery and felt herself drift off for a bit. She was awakened by her mate leaning over her, his eyes full of concern.

"Is everything alright? You don't look well". Midnightfur murmured worriedly.

Starlingwing stood up and stretched, her tail shivering as she did so. "I'm okay". She reassured him. "But something has been worrying me".

She recounted Lavenderkit's vision to him, and his eyes grew wide. "What if it's a sign from Starclan? Perhaps she's meant to be a medicine cat apprentice!"

The black queen shook her head. "Junipertwig seems to think it's a bad sign. She thinks this "Spider" might mean the clans harm, and that we need to keep Lavenderkit from talking to him".

Midnightfur looked dubious. "But how can we figure out why she's having visions if we don't let her have them?"

Starlingwing shrugged, looking away. "I don't know, but we can't let her talk to him. It could be dangerous. We need to listen to Junipertwig".

After hesitating for a second, Midnightfur gave a sigh of resignation. "Okay, I'll help you keep her from having visions".

"Maybe we won't have to stop her, it might not even happen again". Starlingwing mewed hopefully, though even she didn't believe herself.

# Chapter 13

Daisystream stood silently in front of the other cats, shock pulsing beneath her pelt. She hesitated, grasping for words. She didn't know how to answer Petalface's request. Finally, she sputtered out a response.

"Me? Take your kits? I'm already going to have two litters, I can't take on another! Plus they'll all be different ages, how will I explain that?"

Petalface dropped her head towards the ground, looking dejected. Then Turtlefoot turned to Daisystream, her eyes thoughtful. "Actually, Petalface and I are due around the same time. The kits would nearly be the same age".

Petalface popped her head back up, looking hopeful. "That's true! Plus, it's not unusual for some she-cats to have large litters. I've seen as many as six born together before".

"What if we have more than six, collectively? What then?" Daisystream asked, panicked.

"Okay, how about I stay with you until all three of us have had our kits. Then, if there's more than six, I will take my kits and return to my clan. Deal?" Petalface mewed persuasively.

Daisystream hesitated, still not convinced. "But they won't look like me. Now that I think of it, none of them will look like me. Turtlefoot, you're tortoiseshell and Rowanroot is ginger! And Petalface, you have brown fur and Lionstar is also ginger! There is no way they'll believe they're my kits. I have white fur and and Stumpleap has a black pelt!"

Turtlefoot shrugged. "Kits don't always look like their parents. Also, me and Rowanroot both have white fur on us and I have some black fur. And Petalface has a lot of white fur. The kits might come out looking like you after all".

"I guess we'll just have to wait and see". Petalface mewed quietly. "Will you agree to it, just for now? If it looks like the plan won't work out after we have the kits then we'll figure something else out, okay?"

Daisystream took a deep breath, slowly nodding her head. "Okay, I'll agree, for now".

Petalface's eyes lit up and she purred loudly. "Oh thank you Daisystream! You're going to save my kits from being split up and they'll get to grow up with a mother!"

Daisystream shook her head dubiously. "Maybe, only if it all works out".

Spider had watched this whole exchange with wide, confused eyes. "Wait, so Daisystream is going to take in three litters of kits as her own? How is that going to be possible? You'll never have enough milk to keep them alive".

Turtlefoot and Petalface both looked uneasy, and Daisystream could tell that they'd never considered that issue before. Then Petalface lifted her head confidently. "We'll stay here until Newleaf, that way the kits will be old enough to wean off of milk by then. Plus, it'll be easier to travel once the weather warms up".

"That's a great idea". Turtlefoot nodded, relief showing in her eyes. "Does that sound okay Daisystream?"

Daisystream nodded, but was still unsure. This whole situation was starting to turn into a mess, and she wished she could be back home in the nice warm nursery, with her mate by her side.Her heart ached with longing, but she quickly pushed it away. She couldn't just abandon her friends when they were in need; she would do whatever it took to help them.

"Well, now that we have all that sorted, I'm going to relax and eat my vole in the sun, before it disappears for leafbare". Petalface settled down in a bright patch of light and tore into her vole.

The smell of fresh prey made Daisystream's stomach growl, and she

quickly looked around for a place to hunt. Spotting a small cluster of beech trees, she trotted towards them, signaling with her tail for Turtlefoot to follow. "Let's hunt over here".

Turtlefoot padded after her, nodding in agreement. "We should be able to find some mice munching on the beech nuts".

The two she-cats split up and walked around the tree cluster in opposite directions. Daisystream lowered her nose to the ground, sniffing for the scent of mouse. Suddenly a breeze blew the fresh scent of bird to her nose, and she glanced around, spotting a robin pecking at the ground. Daisystream remembered her promise to Turtlefoot the night before, and slowly crept toward the bird. She made sure the wind was blowing towards her, and waited until the bird was busy trying to pull a worm out of the ground. Then she leapt forward, pushing off of the ground hard with her hind paws. The robin saw her too late, and let out an alarm call before Daisystream cut it short with a swipe of her paw.

Happy, she trotted back to the stream with her catch and settled down in the sunlight near Petalface. Daisystream began carefully plucking the feathers off of the robin and setting them aside for Turtlefoot's nest. She realized that Petalface was just as pregnant as Turtlefoot, and started making two piles of feathers, one for each of their nests. Once she had all of the feathers off, she tucked in to eat.

She had just taken the first bite when Turtlefoot came marching out of the tree line, a scowl on her face and a scraggly mouse in her jaws. She sat down beside Daisystream with a huff, dropping the sad looking mouse on the ground.

"I was so close to catching a nice, plump mole, but I couldn't move fast enough because of my huge belly". She grumbled angrily. "All I managed to catch was this scrawny mouse; I'll never get enough food just eating this".

Daisystream nuzzled the tortoiseshell she-cat sympathetically. "You can have half of my robin, don't worry".

Turtlefoot purred and leaned against her. "Thanks, Daisystream".

Suddenly a splash sounded from behind them, and Daisystream turned around to see Spider holding a frog in his mouth. She squealed in disgust and backed away from him. Spider flashed her a confused look and set the frog down.

"What's the matter?"

Daisystream shook her head crossly. "Frogs are gross and slimy, they're not meant to be prey".

Turtlefoot snorted in agreement. "You should join Alderclan if you like eating frogs. With all the bogs and marshes on their territory, you'll have no problem finding one. I bet they eat frogs all the time".

"What's wrong with eating frogs? The way I see it, prey is prey. And with leafbare coming up, catching anything is lucky". Spider mumbled, taking a bite of his frog.

As if on cue, a chilly breeze ruffled Daisystream's fur, and she shuddered thinking about the difficult times ahead of them. By the time Turtlefoot and Petalface had their kits in a moon, leafbare would be in full force. It would be hard to keep the kits warm enough, especially without a proper den.

Gulping down the last of her robin, she stood up and headed for the blackberry bushes where their makeshift den was. She clamped the feathers in her jaw and wiggled inside, dropping the pile by Turtlefoot's nest. There was enough room for another nest for Petalface, so she quickly dug one out. She slipped out of the den to search for bracken, ferns, and moss, and quickly found some, though the ferns had begun to brown. She grabbed a mouthful and reentered the den, dragging the plants with her. She carefully lined Petalface's nest until it was as cushy as the other two. Then she split the feather pile in half and lined each of their nests with them. She sat back and looked at her work, satisfied. *Now all I have to do is reinforce the den walls to keep the cold and wind out.* She thought to herself.

She was startled out of her thoughts by Spider's voice coming from the den entrance. "Need any help in here?"

Daisystream jumped and turned around. "No, that's okay. I'm done in here, I just need to make the den walls and roof stronger".

"It looks cozy in here, perfect for kits. Why do only two of the nests have feathers?" He asked quizzically.

"Well, Turtlefoot and Petalface are about a moon closer to kitting than I am, so they need the extra comfort more".

Spider shook his head. "Still, you'll be kitting before you know it. You'll need more cushioning too". He paused and looked lost in thought for a second, then quickly backed out of the nest, calling, "I'll be back in a bit!"

Confused, Daisystream decided not to ask him where he was going and got back to work. She exited the den and gathered more bracken, weaving the fronds through the blackberry bushes to cover any gaps. She gathered more moss as well, packing it into smaller holes. With the rest of the moss, she spread it around the floor of the den and packed it along the lower parts of the walls to cover any blackberry thorns that were sticking out.

As she walked back out of the den, she saw Turtlefoot staring at it, beaming. "Wow, you did all this work yourself? It looks like a real den!" She exclaimed.

"I had to make sure it was sturdy enough for leafbare and warm enough for us and the kits". Daisystream explained, purring.

Petalface's voice sounded from behind Daisystream. "This is great! Can I look inside? I'll have to make my den like this".

"Your den?" Daisystream asked, puzzled. "I thought you'd stay with us".

Petalface blinked in surprise. "You'd really let me? I thought since we were from different clans and all..."

"None of that matters out here", Daisystream cut her off. "We're all friends now, why not be denmates too?"

Turtlefoot nodded her head in agreement. "Out here, we stick

together".

Petalface purred gratefully. "Oh thank you! I was so worried about being alone in this strange land".

"Don't worry, we won't let that happen". Daisystream reassured her.

*She seems so helpless, maybe she would be better off as a kittypet.* Daisystream thought to herself, casting Turtlefoot a sideways glance. Turtlefoot returned the look, seemingly thinking the same thing.

Just then, Spider trotted up to the three queens, a plump dove in his mouth. "Hey there!" He called. "There's a dove nest nearby, so I went and caught one so you'd have feathers in your nest too. I remembered the nest from when my mate was expecting and wanted feathers in her nest!"

Daisystream's heart warmed at his kindness. "That's so nice of you, I can't believe you'd do that for a stranger".

"I know how uncomfortable Silver, my mate, was when she got close to kitting. The feathers helped her sleep much better". Spider mewed, his eyes sad.

Daisystream touched the tip of her tail to his shoulder gently. "Thank you". She mewed quietly.

Spider shook himself, trying to sound cheerful again. "Well, let's get these feathers in your nest!"

The she-cats nodded and followed him into the den. They started plucking the dove until all of the feathers had been removed. Then Spider and Daisy lined her nest carefully with them, setting a few aside for Turtlefoot and Petalface. They added them into their nests with the robin feathers, and Daisystream nodded, satisfied.

"These nests look so cozy, I can't wait until tonight when I can sleep in mine". Petalface purred loudly.

"Why wait until tonight?" Turtlefoot grumbled, yawning. "I'm exhausted, these kits are weighing me down. I'm going to take a

nap".

"We'll leave you to it". Spider nodded, backing out of the den.

Petalface followed him out, and Daisystream turned to follow them, admiring her work one last time as she left. The den was so warm and cozy now, it might even be safer than the warriors den back in Pineclan. She took a deep breath, feeling calmer than she had in awhile. They'd be okay out her for a few moons; prey was good and their den was warm and sturdy. Plus, her and Turtlefoot now had Spider and Petalface on their side as well. Their plan would work out in the end, Daisystream was sure of it.

# Chapter 14

Turtlefoot trudged through the snow, heading back to their makeshift den. A thin rabbit hung from her jaws and she sighed, knowing this wouldn't be enough food for the three of them. Hopefully Daisystream and Petalface would have more luck hunting, but she doubted it. It had been a moon since they'd arrived in their temporary territory, and leafbare was worse than any of them had thought it would be. The snow just kept piling up, and the queens just kept growing bigger and less capable of hunting.

Turtlefoot's huge belly swung beneath her, and she struggled through the snow. Her heart raced at the thought of how close she was to kitting; it would be any day now. She shouldn't even be out hunting, but prey was so sparse that they needed everyone looking for food.

She was just within view of the blackberry den when she felt a sudden, sharp pain in her stomach. Turtlefoot dropped the rabbit, yowling in pain. Her legs buckled beneath her and she fell into the snow. Panicking, she tried to get back up only for another terrible pain to rip through  her stomach.

*I can't have the kits out here!* She thought to herself, struggling to drag herself through the snow towards the den. *They'll freeze instantly!*

Knowing she wouldn't make it back to the den in time if she didn't get help, she opened her mouth in a loud wail. "Daisystream! Petalface!" She shrieked, desperately searching for her denmates. She called for what felt like forever, but neither of the other queens showed up.*They must be out hunting.* Turtlefoot thought miserably, continuing to call for them. She was about to give up when she heard thrumming paw steps behind her.

Weakly, she glanced over her shoulder and saw Spider racing towards her. His eyes were wide with fear as he skidded to a halt beside her. "Turtlefoot, what's happening?"

"I'm kitting!" She gasped as another pain rippled through her belly. "I need help getting back to the den, quick!"

Spider nodded and quickly nudged his shoulder beneath her, lifting her up onto her feet. Turtlefoot leaned heavily on him, her legs weak from the pain. Spider snapped up the rabbit she had caught and quickly began guiding her to the den. It seemed to take ages, but finally they reached the bush. Spider gently nudged her inside, and she collapsed in her nest, panting.

"There are herbs in the corner," Turtlefoot gasped. "Our medicine cat gave them to us, she said we'd need Chervil during kitting. It's the leaves that kind of look like ferns".

Spider nodded, sorting through the herbs until he found them. He quickly brought them over and Turtlefoot chewed them, in too much pain to even notice the bad taste. She desperately thought back to the kitting instructions Junipertwig had given them, and remembered the step by step process she had told them.

"Spider, I need you to put your paws on my belly. When you feel a large ripple pass through my stomach, tell me to push. When the kit comes out, put it by me and I'll lick it until it's warm". She instructed, her teeth gritting in pain as she spoke.

Looking terrified, Spider gently laid his paws on Turtlefoot's belly. After a few moments, a ripple passed through her stomach, and Turtlefoot glanced at Spider. "Now?" She gasped.

"No not yet, I don't think that was it. Silver's ripples were bigger when it was time to push". Spider said, sounding uncertain.

Turtlefoot thought about pushing anyway, but decided to listen to Spider. He knew what he was doing better than she did. *What if he's wrong though?* She thought tentatively. She could be risking herself and her kits based off of a random rogue's advice.

Suddenly Turtlefoot felt a pain so severe that she let out a screech. A huge ripple passed through her belly and Spider turned towards her quickly. "Push, now!" In that moment, Turtlefoot knew she had been right to trust Spider.

Turtlefoot pushed hard, gasping in pain. "Again!" Spider instructed.

Just then, Daisystream burst through the den entrance followed closely by Petalface. "What's happening?" Daisystream mewed urgently.

"She's kitting," Spider told her. "She needs to push again!"

Turtlefoot listened, bearing down hard and pushing. Suddenly she heard a mewl and saw a tiny white kit with ginger ears laying in her nest. Spider gently picked up the kit and set it by her. Turtlefoot looked down at the kit and was shocked at how little of a connection she felt to it. It was still her kit, shouldn't she at least feel something? Pushing her thoughts aside, she quickly began licking its fur the wrong way to warm it up.

Suddenly another sharp pain passed through her and she moaned in pain, collapsing on her side. Daisystream quickly picked up the kit and curled around it. "I'll warm it up, you focus on kitting". She encouraged.

Turtlefoot blinked at her gratefully before being overcome with pain again. Spider told her to push again, and she did as hard as she could. She felt another kit slither out into her nest and heard tiny mews coming from it. Spider held up a small gray kit and set it next to its littermate. Daisystream turned her attention to the new kit and began licking it too.

"Is it over yet?" Turtlefoot asked, exhaustion filling her mew.

Another pain gripped her body and she gasped loudly. Spider shook his head. "There's our answer, there's another kit coming".

"When?" Turtlefoot moaned.

"Not yet". Spider mewed. Another pain passed through Turtlefoot and she gasped. "Not yet". Then a sharp, familiar pain shook her body, and Spider yowled, "Now!"

Turtlefoot pushed again, feeling exhaustion dragging at her body. She forced herself to keep going until she heard another tiny wail. She fell back in her nest, panting. Spider moved the kit next to her

head. "I think you're done, you should warm this one". He said gently.

Turtlefoot nodded, looking down at the kit. It was a dilute tortoiseshell kit with white spots. The kit mewed and searched for her with its tiny white paws, and Turtlefoot quickly began licking it to warm it. She felt no connection with this one either and shuddered. *What's wrong with me?*

Spider's voice shook her out of her thoughts. "The kits with Daisystream are toms, and the kit with you is a she-kit. Do you have names picked out?"

The tortoiseshell she-cat shook her head. "I was going to let Daisystream name them. They're her kits after all".

Her friend slowly shook her head. "No Turtlefoot, you should name them. You kitted them, and I want them to have some mark of you on them".

Turtlefoot hesitated, then nodded. "Okay... I suppose". She glanced down at the kit in her nest. "I like all of the birch trees around here, and this kit reminds me of them because of her markings. So I'll name her Birchkit".

"That's a great name". Petalface purred. Daisystream nodded happily in agreement.

Looking over at the kits in Daisystream's nest, Turtlefoot tilted her head thoughtfully. "The white kit's ginger ears kind of remind me of moth wings, so I'll name him Mothkit".

"I like that name". Spider nodded encouragingly.

"And the last kit..." Turtlefoot stared at the tiny gray kit, then turned to Spider. "You said your mate's name was Silver?"

He nodded, looking confused, and Turtlefoot purred gently. "Then Silverkit he is, in honor of your mate".

Spider's eyes rounded with gratitude and he began to purr. "Thank you, she would be so happy to know that".

Daisystream beamed as she stared at the kits. "Birchkit, Mothkit, and Silverkit. Such great names".

Suddenly the kits began mewling loudly, and Turtlefoot stared at them in confusion. "What do they want?"

"They just want to eat". Daisystream mewed gently. "Will you let them nurse?"

Turtlefoot hesitated, then shook herself quickly. "Yes, of course".

As Daisystream set Mothkit and Silverkit next to Birchkit by Turtlefoot's stomach, she turned to Spider. "Will you grab borage out of the herb pile? Junipertwig said it helps milk supply".

"What does it look like?" The tom asked as he spread out the herbs.

Petalface padded forward, scooping up the right herbs. "It's these ones". She explained to Spider. "I made sure to familiarize myself with them before I left my clan".

The brown and white she-cat took the herbs over to Turtlefoot, and she blinked gratefully at her. "Thanks, Petalface".

She quickly ate up the herbs, then guided the mewling kits to her stomach. They began to suckle, and Turtlefoot sighed in relief. She'd been worried that she wouldn't be able to get them to eat. Looking down at the kits, her heart sunk. She thought nursing them might make her feel more attached to the kits, but she still felt nothing. Any doubt about giving the kits to Daisystream faded; she was doing the right thing, she wasn't meant to be a mother. Rowanroot was right.

Daisystream was staring down at the kits in wonder, love in her eyes. Turtlefoot knew that's how a mother should look at her kits, not with the disdain that Turtlefoot felt when she looked at them.

"The kits don't really look like they could be my kits". Daisystream muttered worriedly.

Petalface studied the kits thoughtfully. "Well, Silverkit could definitely be your's. You have white fur and your mate has black

fur, right? You two could easily have a gray kit".

"And Mothkit has white fur like you". Spider mewed encouragingly.

Turtlefoot sighed. "He does have ginger ears though, like Rowanroot".

"Doesn't your mate have ginger kin?". Petalface asked.

"That's true! Our kits could have ginger fur since his kin does. But what about Birchkit? She looks like a miniature Turtlefoot". Daisystream fretted.

Turtlefoot nodded, knowing she was right. "We'll just have to hope that the clan believes us when we say she's your kit".

"She does have white splashes of fur, which makes it a little more believable". Spider pointed out.

"I suppose so". Daisystream nodded. "Still, we'll have to try and shield her as best as possible so that nobody asks any questions".

Turtlefoot nodded in agreement. "We'll figure it out, don't worry".

Daisystream turned to Petalface. "I've been thinking about how your fur is brown and white, well a lot of my kin have brown and white fur. It wouldn't be too hard to believe that my kits would look that way as well".

Turtlefoot looked up. "That's true, your mother has brown fur and so do your littermates".

"Exactly". Daisystream nodded. "I think we'll only have trouble convincing the clan if the kits look like Lionstar, since he has red fur".

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, let's continue hunting and let Turtlefoot rest with the kits". Petalface murmured gently.

Spider quickly jumped to his feet. "I can hunt with Daisystream, you should stay here with Turtlefoot and rest since you're close to

kitting too".

Petalface nodded. "Good point, I do feel like I could take a nap".

Spider and Daisystream waved their tails in farewell and began to head to the entrance. Turtlefoot watched sleepily as the two cats left the den to hunt. She sighed sadly, knowing her hunting days were over for awhile now. Yawning, she realized she was too tired to think about that now, and curled around the nursing kits to sleep. Her eyelids slowly drooped shut, and she sighed in relief as darkness overcame her.

# Chapter 15

Starlingwing paced the clearing restlessly. It had been a moon since Turtlefoot and Daisystream had disappeared while taking herbs to another clan and still there had been no sign of them. Starlingwing thought back to how she had volunteered for that outing, and thanked Starclan that she hadn't gone. If she had, she may have disappeared as well and left her kits motherless.

The clan had almost given up hope of finding them, and they had sat vigil for the two warriors the night before. Starlingwing had noticed that Turtlefoot's littermate, Ivysprout, had turned to Turtlefoot's former mate, Rowanroot, for comfort. They were getting a little too close for Starlingwing's liking. It had only been a moon and already Rowanroot was moving on, with Turtlefoot's sister of all cats.

Shaking out her fur, she reminded herself that she should stay out of other's business. She had kits to focus on anyway. Lavenderkit had insisted on staying up with Starlingwing and Midnightfur for the vigil, and now she was exhausted. Starlingwing had been trying to convince her to nap all day, but now that Lavenderkit was only a moon away from becoming an apprentice, she had decided she was too old to nap.

Luckily, her other three kits were fast asleep, napping peacefully in the nursery. They were three moons old now, but still needed extra rest, especially with the cold leafbare upon them. Luckily, this cold season hadn't been too harsh so far, and the clan had only had a light dusting of snow. Prey was sparse, but the hunting patrols still found enough to feed the clan.

Suddenly Starlingwing felt something pounce on her tail, and turned around crossly to see Lavenderkit with it between her paws. The silver tabby kit looked up at her sheepishly, mewing in amusement. She had still been having visions, but had forced

herself to stop each time. Starlingwing was proud of her for stopping, but still worried about why she was having these visions. Junipertwig was baffled, and didn't seem to think that they were from Starclan at all. She had never seen anything like this apparently. Still, Lavenderkit acted like a perfectly normal kit, and Starlingwing purred as she batted around her tail.

"Hey! That's attached to me you know!" She meowed, trying to sound stern.

"I know, but I need to practice hunting! I'll be an apprentice in less than a moon!" The kit squealed.

"Well, Firekit, Shinekit, Acornkit, and Finchkit will all be apprentices in less than a moon too and you don't see them pouncing on their mother's tail!"

Lavenderkit puffed up her chest indignantly. "Actually, I saw them do it yesterday to their mother *and* their father".

Starlingwing purred with laughter and gently pushed Lavenderkit over. "You cheeky kit!"

Lavenderkit giggled and hopped back onto her paws. Suddenly she let out a big yawn and began to sway, her eyes looking heavy. Starlingwing gently steadied her with a paw. "Why don't you go nap darling?"

"I'm too big to nap! I'll be an apprentice soon and won't have time for naps then!" Lavenderkit mewed sharply.

Starlingwing sighed, knowing the kit would get grouchy without sleep. Spotting her father, Owlsneeze, at the entrance of the elders den, Starlingwing suddenly had an idea. While Lavenderkit was distracted, the tabby queen quickly trotted over to her father.

"Hi Starlingwing, how are the kits all doing?" Owlsneeze purred as she approached.

"They're doing good," Starlingwing purred, touching her nose to his. "But Lavenderkit stayed up for the vigil last night and won't nap now, so she's getting grouchy. Will you tell her a super long story

about your warrior days? Maybe she'll fall asleep during it".

Owlsneeze nodded, his eyes twinkling. "Of course, I love telling stories anyway. Send her over, I'll go make sure my nest is extra comfy so she can't resist sleeping".

Starlingwing nuzzled her father gratefully. "Thank you Owlsneeze, I'll go tell her now!"

Padding back across the clearing, she found Lavenderkit talking with Acornkit about who their mentors would be. Acornkit jumped with excitement as she talked about the mentor she wanted. "I hope I get Sootdrift! Our pelts are so similar in color that we could blend in together! He could teach me how to use it to my advantage".

"I want Poppyfoot! How cool would that be to have the clan deputy as a mentor?"

Starlingwing shook her head. "Now now, you know that you can't choose your own mentor. Lionstar will choose whoever he thinks will work best with you".

"I know, we're just being hopeful". Lavenderkit mewed dejectedly.

"Any of these warriors would be excellent mentors, you'll be lucky whoever you get". Starlingwing mewed confidently.

"I just hope I don't get Alderbush". Lavenderkit murmured. "He's such a mousebrain and thinks he can get away with whatever he wants just because his brother is the clan leader".

Starlingwing chided her daughter, but secretly she agreed. Alderbush *was* a prickly cat, and the tabby queen had always sensed that he resented Lavenderkit for not being clan born. Shaking her head, she brushed it off; she was probably just being paranoid. "Come now, Lavenderkit. Owlsneeze said he has a great story to tell you!"

Lavenderkit's eyes lit up excitedly and she began running towards the elders den, squealing happily. Acornkit ran behind her, looking equally excited. "I'm coming with you! I want to hear a story too".

Starlingwing flinched, hoping her father wouldn't mind *two* rambunctious kits in his nest. Just then, Plumeyes raced out of the nursery looking startled. "Have you seen Acornkit? She slipped away while I was detaching Finchkit from my tail". She gasped, exasperated.

Starlingwing purred in amusement. "She just went to the elders den with Lavenderkit. Owlsneeze is going to tell them a story". She explained. "I know how you feel, I just had to shake Lavenderkit off of my tail earlier".

"I love having kits and being their mother, but I thank Starclan that they're almost apprentices!" Plumeyes confessed.

Starlingwing nodded sympathetically. "I bet it's been difficult. I'm looking forward to having one less kit in my nest as well, three will be easier to manage".

The tabby she-cat turned as the nursery entrance rustled again. Her mate, Midnightfur, came out looking frazzled with all three of their younger kits on his back. Slykit was in the front, clinging to his father's scruff and squealing with delight. "Faster father! Faster!"

Midnightfur groaned. "But this is a badger ride. Badgers move slowly and they waddle".

"If you're a badger, shouldn't we attack you? You've invaded our camp!" Shadowkit shrieked.

"Let's get him!" Gladekit joined in.

Together, all three kits began pulling on Midnightfur's pelt, trying to drag him to the ground. He staggered under their combined weight and flopped onto his side. The kits piled on top of him, squealing and pummeling him with their tiny paws.

Starlingwing cleared her throat loudly, glaring down at the kits. Slowly, they all stopped attacking their father and sat on their haunches, blinking up at her sheepishly. "Just what do you think you're doing to your father?" She asked sternly.

"Oh they're just playing, don't scold them too harshly". Midnightfur

purred with amusement. "I do think I need a break from them though, would you mind?"

Starlingwing purred. "Of course not, I'm sure Lionstar wants you out hunting anyway. Prey is getting scarcer".

Midnightfur heaved himself to his paws, shaking a light dusting of snow from his black pelt. "You're probably right. At least we've been lucky, leafbare has been mild. Newleaf will be here before we know it".

"I sure hope so". Starlingwing murmured, missing the feeling of the sun on her pelt.

She chided herself for thinking so selfishly when two of her clanmates, one expecting kits, could be out alone in the cold fending for themselves right now. Her heart sank as she realized that probably wasn't true at all; she had started to accept the fact that they were either dead or had been captured by twolegs. Either way, she doubted the clan would ever see them again.

Her heart heavy, she rounded her kits up and herded them back into the nursery and out of the cold. She was surprised to see Stumpleap gently patting together a nest in the corner of the den. She shot Plumeyes a quizzical look, and the ginger queen leaned closer to whisper in her ear.

"He's been in here all day making a nest for Daisystream, just in case she returns. She would've kitted in a moon". She explained quietly.

Stumpleap looked up, his blue eyes weary and his black pelt dull. "Hi Starlingwing, I hope you don't mind that I'm in here".

Starlingwing's heart twisted with agony at how sad and dazed he looked. "Of course not. While you're here though, you might as well have a nap in the nest to test out how comfy it is". She suggested gently.

Stumpleap hesitated, then nodded slowly. "Okay, that sounds like a good idea".

He curled up in the nest, a loose fern frond covering his pink nose. Almost immediately, his chest began to slowly rise and fall and Starlingwing could hear the gentle sound of his snoring. She knew that the young warrior had lost a lot of sleep over his mate's disappearance, and he was probably exhausted. She looked at his ungroomed pelt and gave a tiny shake of her head; she couldn't let him go on looking so scruffy and matted. Quietly settling beside the sleeping tom, she groomed him until his black fur shined.

Starlingwing sat back, satisfied with how much nicer the young tom looked. Plumeyes gave a small purr of approval. "Now at least he looks clean and tidy".

The tabby queen was about to agree when she was startled by a tiny paw prodding her in the side. She looked down to see Shadowkit staring up at her, confused. "Why can't he just groom himself?" She mewed loudly.

Starlingwing quickly slapped her tail over her kit's muzzle. "Quiet! Can't you see he's sleeping? And to answer your question, he can't groom himself because he's sad. His mate is missing and he is worried about her". She hissed.

"Then why doesn't he go look for her instead of just moaning around like a sick badger?" Slykit asked in exasperation.

"He has looked for her, and so has everyone else in the camp. We can't find her or the other missing warrior. That's why he's so distraught. Look, if you kits can't be respectful I will send you out into the cold snow". She growled quietly.

"I want to go play in the snow!" Gladekit squealed excitedly. "Let's go!"

Before Starlingwing could stop them, all three kits had bundled themselves out of the nursery, sending the lichen curtain swishing wildly. Starlingwing lashed her tail in frustration, calling out after them in annoyance. "That was meant as a punishment!"

She glanced over at Plumeyes, meaning to give her a frustrated look, only to see her engulfed in a writhing pile of her kits. She

couldn't tell which ginger fur was Plumeyes and which was her kits. Starlingwing's shoulders sagged as she was overcome with the exhaustion of having kits. Padding out of the nursery to find her's, she glanced up at the overcast sky. Thick, fluffy clouds moved against a gray background, threatening to dump snow onto the camp at any time. She began to long for Newleaf again, not only to get rid of the snow and cold, but because then her kits would be closer to becoming apprentices.

Starlingwing closed her eyes, her head still raised towards the sky. *Please Starclan, if I have another litter of kits, make it only one or two. Four is simply too many.* She pleaded silently.

# Chapter 16

Daisystream stared down at the three kits in her nest, happiness trembling through her. Mothkit stretched his jaws in a yawn, and Daisystream felt like her heart would burst with love. Turtlefoot had insisted on going out to stretch her legs and had left the kits with her. It had only been a few sunrises since she'd had the kits, but the tortoiseshell warrior was already restless, getting out whenever she could. Daisystream didn't mind though, she loved spending time with the kits.

Her happiness quickly turned to worry as Birchkit, the tiny tortoiseshell she-kit, let out a horrible-sounding cough. The kit had been coughing since the night she was born, but none of the cats knew what to do to help her. Daisystream sighed, knowing they needed a medicine cat. She knew that wasn't possible, and they'd just have to keep giving her Coltsfoot for the cough and hope for the best.

Daisystream started as she realized that they were running low on Coltsfoot. Spider and Turtlefoot had only managed to find a small clump of it, and most of it was withered. They had given the healthiest looking pieces to Birchkit, and now there were only a few stems of it left. They'd have to go looking for more later.

The white she-cat flinched as Birchkit broke out in another fit of coughing. *What if it's something serious? What if she dies because we were too ashamed to return to the clans early and admit what we did?*

Daisystream was interrupted from her thoughts as Petalface sat up quickly in her nest, looking startled. Before she could ask what was wrong, Petalface hunched over and let out a wail, her eyes wide and terrified.

"What's happening? Are you kitting?" Daisystream yelped in shock.

The brown and white queen nodded, her eyes gleaming with fear in

the darkness of the den. "I think so". She gasped. "We need Spider, he did so well with Turtlefoot!"

"I'll go find him!" Daisystream quickly slid out of her nest, careful not to disturb the kits.

She squeezed herself through the blackberry vines until she burst into the cold leafbare air. She had to pause as her eyes adjusted to the bright light, reflecting off of the sparkling white snow. Daisystream was belly deep in it, and the chilled seeped through her fur. She shivered, staring around at the deep, cold snow. Leaf-fall and leafbare had seemed so mild in the clan territories, how was it this bad just upstream?

Returning her attention to the task at hand, she raced through the birch trees to the area Spider lived. She had forgotten exactly where his nest was, but she knew it had to be close. She waded through the snow, moving as quickly as possible and calling the black tom's name.

"Spider!" She yowled. "Where are you?"

She had begun to give up when she heard a distant yowl calling her name. She spun around, relief washing over her pelt as she saw a black figure outlined in the snow. Spider was bounding through the snow, a worried expression on his face.

He skidded to a halt beside her, sending snow flying into the air. He paused, trying to catch his breath. "What's the matter?" He finally gasped out.

"Petalface is kitting, we have to go help her!" Without waiting for a reply, she spun around and raced along, swerving around snow-laden bushes and ducking under low-hanging branches. She could feel Spider right on her tail, his hot, panicked breath on her haunches.

Finally they reached the blackberry bushes, and Daisystream could pick up Turtlefoot's scent. *Oh good, she's back from stretching her legs.* She squeezed through the entrance of the den, thorns scraping through her fur. The tangy smell of blood hit her nose as she

entered the den and she gasped. *Is something wrong with Petalface?*

She burst into the den just as Petalface let out a yowl of pain. Turtlefoot was crouched over her with her paws gently resting on the brown and white she-cat's flank. Ripple after ripple passed through Petalface, and she looked exhausted already.

"I think something is wrong!" Turtlefoot gasped. "She's bleeding and the kit is coming out feet first".

Daisystream froze. *Oh no, are they both going to die?* Pulling herself together, she raced over to the herb pile. "We need raspberry leaf to stop the bleeding".

Quickly finding it, she rushed over and gave it to Petalface, who chewed it up and swallowed it. "Thanks Daisystream," she panted.

Behind her, Daisystream could hear the kits mewling desperately. *They must be hungry.* "Turtlefoot, Spider and I will take over here. You need to go feed the kits".

Looking frustrated, the tortoiseshell warrior padded dejectedly over to the kits and settled down in the nest with them. They began suckling, and Turtlefoot squirmed, looking around uncomfortably.

Daisystream rolled her eyes, then quickly turned her attention back to the kitting queen. "Okay, I remember Junipertwig telling us what to do if the kit comes feet first. It'll be okay, but you need to push hard and fast. The longer the kit stays in there, the more danger it's in".

Petalface nodded, her green eyes wide with fear. "I can do this". She whispered, more to herself than to anyone else.

Spider sat still, his paws on the queen's belly. Suddenly he looked up, nodding to Petalface. "Push now!"

"Push hard!" Daisystream yowled.

Petalface shrieked as she pushed with all of her might, then collapsed back into the nest as the sound of thin mewling pierced the air. Daisystream gazed at the newborn kit, marveling at how

tiny it was. "It's a she-kit". She mewed quietly, her gaze traveling over its tiny white body with brown paws and a brown tail

"She's lovely". Petalface whispered, pulling the kit to her belly as she began to lick its wet fur. The sorrow and love in the warrior's eyes made Daisystream wonder if she was reconsidering giving her kits up.

"You're not done yet Petalface, there's one more". Spider murmured quietly. "This one is coming out head first luckily".

Petalface nodded, determination returning to her eyes. She braced herself, waiting for Spider's command. The black tom nodded, "okay, push again!"

Bearing down, Petalface pushed until her tail shivered. Daisystream watched in amazement at how tough the usually timid warrior seemed. Finally, a dark red she-kit slid into the nest, mewling loudly.

"That's a problem". She muttered to herself quietly. *She looks just like Lionstar.*

Turtlefoot, seeming to read her thoughts, called to her quietly. "Don't worry, Daisystream. Stumpleap has ginger kin. No one will think anything of it, they don't even know Lionstar was expecting kits".

Daisystream nodded, seeing sense in what her friend said. It was true, only her, Lionstar, Petalface, and Turtlefoot had known that Lionstar was the father of Petalface's kits. No one would suspect that this she-kit was his. *Except maybe Lionstar.* She thought dubiously.

Turning her attention back to Petalface, she saw the queen covering her daughters with affectionate licks. "They're so perfect". She gasped.

"Congratulations". Daisystream purred. "What are you going to name them?"

"The white and brown she-kit is Echokit, and the red she-kit is

Fernkit". She murmured affectionately.

"Those are great name". Daisystream mewed. She hesitated, wondering if she should voice her thoughts aloud. "Are... are you sure you want to give them up?"

Petalface looked devastated, but nodded her head slowly. "I have never felt right in the clans. Ever since I was a kit and heard the elder's tell stories about kittypets, I've dreamt of becoming one. They have life so easy. They have their food given to them, they have soft beds, their dens are always warm, and they can just sleep all day. I'm sure this is what I want to do".

"You could always take your kits with you and hope that the twolegs let you keep them". Daisystream suggested.

Petalface shook her head. "No, I can't take that risk. By giving them to you, I'm ensuring that they will stay together and grow up with a loving mother".

Daisystream nodded. "I understand".

Suddenly Turtlefoot let out a startled shriek from behind her. "Birchkit has stopped breathing!"

"What?" Daisystream yowled, racing over to the nest.

The tiny tortoiseshell she-kit lay motionless in the nest, her chest no longer rising and falling. Quickly, Spider tugged her out of the nest and began pouncing on her tiny chest, trying to restart her heart. He kept going for what seemed like moons, but eventually he stopped, shaking his head sadly.

"No!" Daisystream wailed, her voice thick with grief. "I knew this was a horrible idea, she never would've died if we'd been back in Pineclan with Junipertwig!"

She continued moaning loudly, waves of grief and guilt cascading over her body. Her pelt burned with shame knowing that the kit's death was partially her fault. If she'd never gone along with this plan, they never would have lost this kit.

Spider placed his tail on her shoulders soothingly. "Daisystream, you need to calm down or-"

Suddenly a sharp pain ripped through her belly and Daisystream collapsed, gasping.

"-or you'll kit early". The black tom sighed.

Spider gently nudged his shoulder underneath her and led her back to her nest. She flopped down into it, pain grasping her body as she did. "But I can't kit now, it's too early! I'm not supposed to kit for another moon".

"Junipertwig warned us that this could happen with too much stress". Turtlefoot reminded her, eyes rounded with worry.

"Well how do we stop it?" Daisystream asked desperately, gritting her teeth as another wave of pain wracked her body.

"We can't stop it, we just have to hope for the best". Spider mewed grimly.

Daisystream panted frantically, wave after wave of pain washing over her body. It seemed like she'd been kitting for days, but Spider still had not given her the signal to push. The white she-cat grew exhausted, barely able to hold her head up any longer. The faint light streaming through the roof of the den had faded, and Daisystream could tell that it was night now.

Finally, Spider nodded. "Push!" He yowled.

Daisystream squealed in mixed pain and terror as she pushed, imagining that the kits she'd waited her whole life for would come out stillborn. But to her surprise, a squeal sounded from the nest, and Spider placed the tiniest she-kit she'd ever seen next to her belly. She was almost completely white, but had black spots poking through.

"Wow she's so small! I've never seen such a small kit". She whispered, gently licking her daughter's fur.

"The important thing is that she's healthy". Spider announced

triumphantly. "But there are more kits coming, so I need you to focus".

Daisystream nodded, waiting for the cue from Spider. He gave it, and she pushed again, renewed confidence and hope stirring in her chest. Again, she heard mewling coming from the nest, and Spider moved a tom into her nest, as equally small as his sister. He was all black, just like Stumpleap, and Daisystream let out a loud purr as she lapped at him.

"One more". Spider announced. Daisystream waited for him to tell her to push, but he didn't, and a look of concern spread across his face. "It's not coming".

A feeling of dread wormed its way into her belly, making her feel heavy. "What? What do you mean?" Daisystream gasped.

"The kit isn't coming for some reason, something is wrong". Spider repeated himself, his eyes wide.

"What do we do? We have to get my kit out!" She shrieked.

"You'll have to push it out, but it won't be easy. You're going to need to push harder than ever before, and probably for a long time. Can you do that?" Spider asked her fervently.

Daisystream nodded, stammering as she replied. "I... I think so".

"Good, now push!"

Daisystream panted as she pushed, darkness swimming in and out of her vision. She had been pushing all night, and she was growing weaker by the second. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized that light was streaming in through the roof of the den again; it was already dawn, and still her kit had not been born.

Finally, she felt something inside her give, and on her last push, the kit slid into the nest. This one was even smaller than the other two, and didn't move at all, his black pelt almost blending in to the shadows of her nest. Daisystream held her breath, waiting for it to let out a squeal as its littermates had done, but only silence followed its birth.

"I'm sorry," Spider mewed softly. "This one, a tom, didn't make it".

Daisystream's whole body seemed to turn to ice and another wave of grief hit her. She threw her head back in a heart wrenching wail, mourning the two dead kits. First Birchkit, now this tom kit. If they lost any more, Daisystream felt she would spiral into despair.

"You should name him before he is sent off to Starclan". Petalface murmured gently.

Daisystream nodded silently. A hole opened up in her heart as she stared at his tiny, motionless body. "Chasmkit".

# Chapter 17

Turtlefoot stood up stiffly as the sun rose above the horizon. The vigil for Birchkit and Chasmkit was over, and Spider gently picked up the two tiny bodies and padded off into the forest to bury them. Daisystream moaned mournfully as she watched her kits being carried off, then hung her head and padded back into the den.

Turtlefoot followed her closely, the warm milky scent of kits flowing over her as she entered. The smell *was* comforting, but she still couldn't get used to nursing kits. It was uncomfortable how much they depended on her, and she couldn't wait until Daisystream could take them off of her paws.

Petalface looked up as they entered, sympathy in her green gaze. She had stayed in the den to look after the kits during the vigil. Now, Daisystream gently moved her kits back to her nest and curled around them, licking their heads gently. The white and black she-kit, Thawkit, mewled hungrily, and Daisystream nudged her close to her belly to suckle. The black tom kit, Treekit, followed his sister and began eating.

Turtlefoot retrieved her kits as well, settling in beside them. She was shocked when Mothkit blinked up at her with brilliant green eyes, and she gasped allowed. "He's opened his eyes!"

"Already?" Petalface mewed in amazement. "But he's only four days old!"

"He must just be an advanced kit". Daisystream purred, some of her usual happiness restored.

Glancing down at Silverkit, she realized that the other tom had not opened his eyes. *Daisystream must be right, Mothkit is advanced.* She paused, wondering if that was a sign that he was going to be an important cat someday. Shaking her head, she realized she was being silly. Still, staring into those piercing green eyes, she couldn't

shake the feeling that it meant something.

Exhausted after the vigil, Turtlefoot curled around the kits and closed her eyes. Their tiny squeaks and small paws prodding her in the side made it hard to fall asleep, and she huffed in frustration. *Being a queen is a pain in the tail.* Finally, she felt herself slipping into sleep, and darkness enveloped her.

Turtlefoot stretched in the weak sunlight as she watched Mothkit and Silverkit tumble around in the snow. It had been a moon since they were born, and already they were strong and feisty toms. Daisystream yawned beside her, flicking snow off of her paws. Thawkit and Treekit chased after the two toms, stumbling in the snow as they tried to keep up. Even though they were only three days younger than the toms, they were still quite a bit smaller because they had been kitted early.

Turtlefoot glanced around, searching for Echokit and Fernkit. She spotted the two she-kits huddling in the entrance to the den, looking disdainfully at the other kits playing. "It's much too cold to be playing outside". Fernkit squeaked indignantly.

Turtlefoot purred in amusement, but Daisystream nodded in agreement. "Very true, Fernkit. Come on kits, if we stay out in this snow any longer we'll all catch whitecough".

"But mother," Mothkit complained. "I'm not even cold".

"Yeah, why can't we stay out longer?" Thawkit squeaked, her tiny voice shrill.

"Come now, I don't want you getting sick. No more arguing, just go back in the den". Daisystream mewed firmly.

The kits grumbled complaints, but none of them protested further, and they all bundled into the blackberry bushes. Daisystream followed them, shaking her head in amusement. Turtlefoot watched them go, relief washing over her. The kits had all taken to Daisystream and had never questioned whether or not she was really their mother. Even though Turtlefoot and Petalface fed their own kits, they had always believed that they all came from

Daisystream's litter.

Turtlefoot started as Spider's voice sounded behind her. "They all seem to be doing well".

"Spider! Where've you been the last couple of days?" The black tom had not visited the blackberry den for at least four sunrises, and the she-cats had all started to worry.

Spider hesitated, looking uncomfortable. One of his front paws scraped sheepishly at the snow, revealing brown, shriveled grass underneath it. "It's... not important". He mumbled.

Turtlefoot narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but decided not to press him any further, changing the subject instead. "Okay. The kits *are* all doing very well". She agreed. "We'll be able to return to the clans in a moon hopefully".

"Yes, the kits will be able to eat freshkill and the snow should've all melted away by then". Spider nodded.

Turtlefoot turned to face the tom, a strange feeling coming over her. She realized that she would miss the tom once they left. He had helped them hunt, had chased off a fox a quarter-moon ago, and had delivered all of the kits. They had grown close to him, and she knew she didn't want to leave him behind when they left.

"You should come with us!" She blurted out, unable to contain her thoughts any longer.

Spider blinked in surprise, a thoughtful expression spreading over his face. "Me? Become a clan cat? I guess I'd never thought of it".

"Please, we've all been through so much together. I feel like you're a part of the clan already". She pleaded.

"Well, I am lonely out here, all by myself. I lost my mate and my kit, and there aren't many other cats out here to keep me company". Spider murmured, half to himself. "I'll think about it".

Turtlefoot nodded, blinking at him warmly. She had grown to like the loner, despite her earlier uncertainties about him. She watched

him walk away and slip into the den entrance, his black tail disappearing into the bushes.

Sighing, she realized just how much her life had changed since she'd left her clan two moons ago. She'd left her family, had kits, given them away, helped two other she-cats have kits, and befriended a loner. Even her surroundings were different. She felt exposed without the wide pine tree branches over her. She could see so much more of the sky out here, and the only trees were spindly birch and beech trees. Undergrowth was sparse except for in a nearby hollow, and the constant trickling of the stream could always be heard.

Staring up at the exposed sky, she realized that more snow was on its way. Fluffy, yellow-tinted clouds move slowly across the sky, threatening to blot out the already weak sunlight. Sighing, Turtlefoot realized she should hunt before the snow reached them.

She turned and headed in the direction of the nearby hollow. Hunting was usually good there because all of the undergrowth provided the prey with plenty of shelter from the snow. Crouching at the edge of the hollow, she tested the wind, then sniffed for any prey scent. Catching the scent of shrew, she followed it down into the hollow, weaving under ferns weighed down my snow. She brushed up against a dead clump of bracken and shuddered as dislodged snow landed on her back.

Underneath the bushes, the ground was dryer, having been shielded from the snow. Turtlefoot was grateful to be out of the cold, wet slush covering the ground above. As she moved silently through the hollow, she spotted the shrew nibbling on something at the foot of a birch tree. Crouching down, she crept closer, keeping as silent as possible. Suddenly a loud bird sounded from the sky, and the shrew scampered away, startled.

"Mouse dung!" Turtlefoot hissed, sitting back on her haunches in frustration.

Glancing at the sky to see what bird had ruined her catch, she was shocked to see a large hawk soaring above her. Its beady eyes searched for prey among the undergrowth, and Turtlefoot held her

breath, hoping it hadn't spotted her. She slowly wedged herself underneath a nearby juniper berry tree, cramming herself underneath the pokey branches. She winced and squirmed as the tree's needles scratched at her, then froze, willing the hawk not to see her.

But her movement rattled the tree, and the hawk turned its beady eyes on her. She gasped, hoping it wouldn't be able to reach her in the bush. She knew that hawks usually didn't carry off full grown cats, but it was probably starving because of leafbare, and she was pretty scrawny from insufficient prey. Her breathing eased as the hawk turned and flew away, clearly deciding that she was too big to catch.

*I need to warn Daisystream not to let the kits out unsupervised. A hawk would have no problem carrying off one of them, especially not Thawkit or Treekit.*

Before she could haul herself out of the juniper tree, a mouse scrambled out of a nearby patch of grass and shot directly in front of her. Surprised, she slammed her paw down on it, killing it instantly. She guessed it had been too busy hiding from the hawk to even notice her. Satisfied that she'd at least caught *something,* she straightened up and headed back to camp.

On her way back she managed to catch another mouse that was distracted nibbling on a beech nut. Carrying both mice by the tails, she slipped into the blackberry den and was greeted by the now familiar scent of milk and kits. She enjoyed the warm smell, but much preferred the scent of the warriors den and all of her Clanmates surrounding her.

"Hi Turtlefoot!" Mothkit squeaked, bouncing up to her. His gaze drifted to the mice. "Wow, did you catch those all on your own?"

"I sure did". Turtlefoot nodded. She set one of the mice down in Petalface's nest, and another in Daisystream's. "Here you go".

Daisystream shook her head. "You should eat it". When Turtlefoot started to protest, she interrupted. "Well, at least share it with me".

Turtlefoot wanted to refuse, but her grumbling stomach said otherwise. Reluctantly, she crouched beside Daisystream and gulped down her half of the mouse. It was barely a mouthful, and her stomach still growled afterwards. She sighed, realizing it would be awhile before she felt fully fed again.

Remembering the hawk, Turtlefoot turned to Daisystream. "When I was out hunting, a shrew I was stalking got scared off by a huge hawk. It looked big and hungry, so we probably shouldn't let the kits out of the den until we're sure it's left the area".

"What? We can't leave the den *at all* now?" Silverkit protested. "That's mouse-brained!"

Daisystream gently flicked her tail over his ear. "That is not a nice word. Besides, keeping you in the den is for your own safety".

"But we like being outside!" Treekit huffed, stomping his paws in the mossy floor of the den.

"Well you'll just have to deal with being cooped up for now". Daisystream told him crossly. "It's warmer in here anyway".

Echokit and Fernkit nodded in agreement from where they were huddled in Daisystream's nest. Neither of them had ever been too keen about the cold. Turtlefoot had to suppress a meow of amusement as she realized how similar they were to Petalface. She hated being outdoors so much that she was becoming a kittypet!

"I'm hungry!" Thawkit suddenly wailed. "My belly is rumbling".

"Come here dear and you can suckle". Daisystream swept Thawkit into her nest with a sweep of her tail. The black and white she-kit quickly began to suckle, and Treekit followed soon after.

"Mothkit, Silverkit, are you two hungry?" Turtlefoot asked reluctantly.

The tom kits nodded eagerly and scrambled into her nest, suckling at her belly hungrily. She spotted Petalface ushering Fernkit and Echokit into her nest and allowing them to suckle as well. Turtlefoot wondered if the four kits would ever mention to other

clan cats that the cat they believed was their mother hadn't been the one to suckle them. *That would definitely raise some questions.* She worried silently.

Pushing her worries out of her head, Turtlefoot told herself that the kits were too young right now to remember this later on. They'd forget by the time they reached clan territory again, and life would go back to normal for her. She could be a regular warrior with no kits to take responsibility for.

Closing her eyes, she willed newleaf to get here quickly so that they could return to Pineclan. She missed her littermates and her parents deeply, as well as Graystream. She could picture his green gaze staring at her lovingly, and drifted into sleep with the image burned in her mind.

# Chapter 18

Starlingwing paced nervously around Lavenderkit, making sure that none of her fur was sticking up abnormally. She gasped as she spotted a leaf stuck in her kit's tail, and quickly tugged it out and tossed it aside. Lavenderkit squirmed, looking annoyed at her mother's fussing.

Satisfied that she had groomed Lavenderkit thoroughly, Starlingwing sat back and purred. "Oh my dear kit, you're going to become an apprentice today!"

"So will we!" Plumeyes kits squealed, bouncing around their parents excitedly. Plumeyes and Jayflight looked exasperated as they tried to groom their hyper kits, and Starlingwing purred in amusement.

"Here, let me help you". Quickly she snagged Finchkit mid bounce and began grooming her, working quickly before she could squirm away.

Jayflight had managed to pin down Acornkit and was grooming her as well, while Plumeyes had Shinekit in her grasp, licking her swiftly. Only Firekit remained running around, completely unaware at his parents attempt to groom him.

Just then Midnightfur entered the nursery and stared at the ginger tom kit in amusement. "Come here you fur ball!" Starlingwing's mate quickly grabbed the kit and groomed him as best he could while the kit continued to squirm.

"Okay, all done!" Plumeyes meowed, satisfied. "And just in time!" She gasped, as Lionstar called out the summonings for a clan meeting.

Both sets of parents herded the kits out, with Starlingwing's three younger kits following behind eagerly. They had never been present

for an apprentice ceremony and were quite excited to see their sister's.

Lionstar stood commandingly on top of the Great Stump, his red fur outlined against the weak leafbare sun. The gathered clan cats quickly made a gap in the middle of the group for the kits to stand in front of their leader. Starlingwing nudged Lavenderkit forward encouragingly, and the silver she-kit cast her an excited glance as she padded to the center of the group.

"I have gathered you all here today to witness the apprentice ceremony of these five kits". The gathered cats murmured excitedly, though Starlingwing caught some of the warriors giving Lavenderkit a dubious stare. "They have reached the age of six moons, and will now start their warrior training".

Lionstar allowed his gaze to travel over the kits, resting first on Firekit. "Firekit, please step forward".

The ginger tom, usually so energetic and mischievous, padded forward solemnly, his head and tail held high. Starlingwing purred with amusement as she realized that he was trying to look more mature in front of his leader.

"Firekit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Firepaw. Your mentor will be Cloudrun. I hope he will pass down his ability to channel his energy into productiveness instead of destructiveness".

The clan cats murmured amused approval, knowing that if any cat could control Firepaw's energetic spirit, it would be Cloudrun. "Firepaw! Firepaw!" The clan chanted the ginger tom's new name as he ran up to touch noses with his mentor.

Next Shinekit became Shinepaw and was apprenticed to Squireltree, and Acornkit became Acornpaw and was apprenticed to Sootdrift. Starlingwing remembered the young she-cat saying before that she had wanted Sootdrift as a mentor. *She must be thrilled.* Finchkit then became Finchpaw, and received Graystream as her mentor.

Starlingwing's chest tightened as Lionstar motioned for Lavenderkit

to step forward. The silver she-kit walked towards their leader, her tail quivering as she did. "Lavenderkit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Lavenderpaw. Your mentor will be Alderbush. May he pass on his ambition and loyalty to you".

"Lavenderpaw! Lavenderpaw!" The clan cheered, though many seemed uncomfortable about the choice Lionstar had made.

Starlingwing's paws seemed to freeze to the ground as Lionstar announced Lavenderpaw's mentor. How could he choose Alderbush as her mentor when he *clearly* wants nothing to do with her? *There's no way he'll ever treat her fairly.* She fretted quietly.

With a scowl on her face, Lavenderpaw slowly approached her new mentor. As she stretched up towards him, the brown tom started to back away, then seemingly decided better of it and grudgingly touched his nose to hers.

Furious, Starlingwing marched towards Lionstar's den, where he'd already disappeared between the roots. Before she could entered, she heard a hushed hiss sound from the den. Starlingwing recognized Poppyfoot's mew. Discomfort wormed beneath her pelt at the idea of eavesdropping, but she had to know what they were discussing.

"How *dare* you make Alderbush the mentor of Lavenderpaw. You know he resents her for not being clanborn. He will treat her harshly and will never agree that she's ready to be a warrior". The deputy's voice trembled with anger, and Starlingwing could picture her green eyes slitted into a glare.

"Poppyfoot, do not forget who is leader of this clan". Lionstar mewed calmly. "I know what decisions are best for this clan. Alderbush and Lavenderpaw will be perfect matches for each other. He will push her to become the best clan cat she can be, and she in turn will allow him to let down his guard and trust other cats".

Starlingwing tipped her head thoughtfully. What her leader said made sense, maybe Alderbush and Lavenderpaw *would* be the perfect match. Doubt wormed beneath her pelt, but she pushed it

away. Lionstar knew best; he had protected the clan for moons and had never steered them wrong. She trusted him.

The deputy's mew jerked her from her thoughts. "Yes, maybe. But what if he never agrees to let her become a warrior? What if he causes her to fail her assessment because he doesn't trust her?" Poppyfoot mewed uncertainly.

A deep purr rumbled in Lionstar's throat. "I know my brother seems prickly, but he will warm up to his apprentice, you'll see".

Clearly not satisfied, Poppyfoot huffed out of the den, not even noticing Starlingwing as she passed. The tabby queen felt a rush of warmth for the clan deputy; at least she had tried to stand up for her kit.

Starlingwing jumped as Lionstar's voice called to her from his den. "Starlingwing, have you come to yowl at me about my decision too?"

Her pelt flashed hot at the embarrassment of being caught, but she shook herself off and stood from where she crouched. "No Lionstar, I respect your decision".

"Good". He mewed in response, not saying anything else.

Curiously, Starlingwing peaked around the roots of his den and saw the leader staring off into space. She wondered what he was thinking about, but dared not ask him. Silently, she backed away and left him in peace. He had been spacing out a lot recently, and the rest of Pineclan had noticed too. Junipertwig had even worried that he was sick, but he had insisted he was fine.

Starlingwing realized with a start that this had been happening since their clanmates, Turtlefoot and Daisystream, had disappeared. Lionstar must be worried about them, thinking about where they could be all the time. She suddenly felt slow for not thinking of this sooner. *He's just scared for his missing clanmates, that's why he's been so distracted.* She reasoned with herself.

Suddenly paws thrummed the ground behind her, and she turned to

see Lavenderpaw racing toward her. Starlingwing burst into purrs, weaving herself around her newly apprenticed kit. "I can't believe you're a paw already!" She gasped.

"But *Alderbush* is my mentor". Lavenderpaw moaned, pushing away from her mother's affection. "How can I become a warrior with that mousebrain teaching me?"

Starlingwing blinked at her affectionately, knowing how hard this must be for her kit. "Listen to me, Lavenderpaw. You need to trust in your mentor, and trust in yourself. You will make it through this just fine, I know it".

An annoyed mew sounded from near the camp entrance. "Lavenderpaw, are you coming? We need to start training right away if you want to become good enough to be a warrior someday". Alderbush stood by the log tunnel, his tail flicking across the dirt floor crossly.

"I'm coming". Lavenderpaw grumbled, turning to say goodbye to Starlingwing before she went.

"Remember to be respectful, but don't let him push you around". Starlingwing whispered, her breath rustling her kit's silver ear fur.

Lavenderpaw nodded in understanding, then raced across the camp and followed Alderbush through the camp entrance and into the pine forest. Starlingwing watched until her kit's striped tail had whisked through the tunnel, then continued to watch until the leaves on the log had stopped rattling.

Starlingwing sighed, sad to see her oldest kit go. In three more moons her other kits would become apprentices, and she'd be left with an empty nest. Just a moon ago she'd been wishing she could return to her warrior duties sooner, but now all she wanted was to stay in the nursery with her kits forever.

Her thoughts were interrupted as tiny claws dug themselves into her shoulder. She stumbled under the unexpected weight, but kept her balance and turned her head to see Gladekit clinging to her fur. The tiny kit's brown pelt fluffed up excitedly. "Hi mother, can I have

a badger ride?"

Starlingwing purred with amusement. "Of course you can". She slowly began lumbering around the camp, taking clumsy steps and shaking Gladekit around as she walked. The kit squealed in delight, digging her claws in to hold on tighter.

"Me next!" Shadowkit mewled impatiently.

"And me!" Slykit squeaked.

"Be patient my dears, you can all have a badger ride". She assured them.

By the time Starlingwing had given all of her kits a badger ride, the sun was beginning to slip beneath the horizon. The bright sunset lit up the clouds, and bathed the clearing in a red light. The half moon appeared, slowly rising in the sky, and Starlingwing noticed the medicine cats getting ready to set out for the Star Cave. Strikepaw looked nervous, and he kept shuffling his black and white paws around in the snow.

"Don't worry Strikepaw," Junipertwig's voice floated across the clearing. "I'm sure Starclan will speak with you this time".

Strikepaw nodded weakly, still not looking reassured. Starlingwing realized that Starclan must not have shared with him during his last meeting at the Star Cave. She wondered if the other medicine cats had received word from their ancestors, or if they were just being silent. She glanced up as silverpelt appeared, and wondered if they'd be waiting to share with the medicine cats this time.

Turning her attention away from Junipertwig and Strikepaw, she focused back on her kits. They were beginning to yawn and their eyes were drooping. "Come on you three, time to sleep". Starlingwing murmured gently, nudging the kits towards the nursery.

"But I'm not tired". Slykit complained, yawning midway through his sentence. His black tail dragged in the snow as he padded ahead of her, leaving a trail in the white dust.

"Oh I know, but I am". Starlingwing meowed, faking a yawn.

"Well if you're tired I guess we can sleep". Gladekit muttered, stumbling over her paws as they walked.

The kits slipped into the nursery ahead of her, and Starlingwing followed them in. She herded them back into their nest and curled around them. Almost immediately all three of them began to snore, their breaths ruffling the feathers woven into their nest. Starlingwing sighed, her whiskers trembling with amusement. *So they weren't tired, huh?*

Starlingwing realized with a start that this was her first night alone in the nursery. Now that the other kits had been apprenticed, Plumeyes had moved back into the warriors den. She glanced around the empty den, her pelt ruffling in discomfort. It felt eerily quiet in the nursery now. Starlingwing rested her head on her paws, looking around at the emptiness. She found it hard to sleep, but eventually fell into a restless lull. Her eyes drooped shut and darkness enveloped her.

She was surprised to open her eyes and find herself in a lush forest. Warmth from the sun touched her pelt, and the long grass felt soft beneath her paws. Oak trees soared up towards the sky, towering over the forest. Prey scent touched her nose, and Starlingwing's belly rumbled with hunger. *Where am I? Where's the snow?*

Deciding to explore, Starlingwing padded slowly through the forest. Her ears were pricked and her eyes darted around, alert for any signs of movement. Suddenly a familiar scent touched her nose, and she whipped her head around. *Lavenderpaw?*

Following the scent, Starlingwing raced through the forest, searching for signs of her adopted kit's silver pelt. As she passed between two trees, a huge cobweb blocked her way. A black spider hung in the middle of it, and she quickly ducked under it and continued running.

As she rounded another corner, she was surprised to find her way blocked by another black spider and web. Turning around, Starlingwing headed in a different direction, trying to find

Lavenderpaw. But her scent seemed to wreath all around her, and soon she lost all sense of direction.

As she ran, she again found her way blocked by a spider and web. Frustrated, she turned and tried a different way. Her path was blocked by spiders time and time again, until finally she found a clear path to run through. As she raced along, she spotted a glimpse of her daughter's silver fur through the bushes. Excited, she put on a burst of speed. She had almost reached her when suddenly she jolted awake in her nest, confused.

*It was just a dream.* Starlingwing panted, feeling as if she'd actually been running all night. Wide awake now, she realized she'd never be able to fall back to sleep. As she was about to slip out of the den to go for a stroll, she heard hushed voices coming from the clearing. She recognized the voices of Junipertwig and Strikepaw, and realized they must have just returned from the Star Cave.

"So Starclan *did* share with you this time?" Junipertwig asked.

"Yes, I had a very odd dream. I saw Lavenderpaw and a black spider, and I heard Darkstar's voice say 'a connection must be made'". Strikepaw murmured in confusion.

Starlingwing perked her ears. *A spider? It's just like my dream! I must tell them about it.* She quickly slipped out of the nursery and silently raced across the clearing, meeting the medicine cats just before they entered their den.

"Starlingwing? Is something wrong?" Junipertwig asked with concern.

"No, but I overheard you discussing Strikepaw's dream. I just had a dream about Lavenderpaw and spider too". Starlingwing meowed quickly. "What does it mean?"

Junipertwig sat down looking stumped. "Why would you both dream about Lavenderpaw and spiders? And what does 'a connection must be made' mean? Unless...".

"Unless what?" Starlingwing asked urgently.

"What was the name of that cat that Lavenderpaw had a vision of?"

"I don't know..." Then a sudden realization hit Starlingwing like a boulder. Her mouth went dry as she answered. "His name was Spider".

"And they were connecting through a vision". Strikepaw murmured.

"Then the message is clear". Junipertwig sighed. "We must allow Lavenderpaw to continue connecting with Spider".

# Chapter 19

Daisystream woke to Spider whispering quietly to someone. She could barely make out his lithe figure across the den, and realized that it was still dark outside. The loner tom had started staying in their den more frequently after the kits were born. Then, when Turtlefoot had spotted the hawk a half moon ago and voiced concerns for the kits' safety, he had moved in permanently. The group had discussed him returning to Pineclan with them, and he'd at first been unsure, but had eventually agreed. Daisystream was happy with decision; she secretly thought he seemed sad as a loner.

Spider's whisper came again, and Daisystream raised her head, wondering who he was talking to. *Is he so lonely that he talks to himself?* Glancing around the den, the white queen dimly saw Turtlefoot's tortoiseshell flank rising and falling as she slept. Petalface was also still asleep, her gentle snores sounding from her nest. Looking in her own nest, Daisystream counted the kits to make sure none of them had roused Spider.

Thawkit, the smallest of the six, was curled under Daisystream's chin, her white fur gently glowing in the dark. Mothkit, the biggest and boldest of the kits, was on the edge of the nest; he insisted that he was too old to be coddled at night. Fernkit and Echokit, who were inseparable, were tangled around each other in a pile of brown, red, and white fur. Silverkit, who'd always been quieter than the other kits, slept silently against the queen's flank. Treekit slept next to him, his long black tail fidgeting in his sleep. *Just like Stumpleap.* Daisystream thought wistfully.

*So all six are still asleep. What in Starclan's name is Spider doing then?*

Careful not to disturb her kits, Daisystream slipped out of the nest. Thawkit mewled in protest, but remained asleep. Creeping across the den, Daisystream pricked her ears to hear what Spider was

saying. The more she listened, the more confused she got.

"So you're Lavender*paw* now? Clan cats change their names?" The black tom paused, as if listening to a reply, then continued. "Well, why did you finally connect with me again? We haven't spoken since you were Lavender*kit*. How are we even able to talk to each other?"

Daisystream's heart pounded as she realized who he was talking to. Somehow he had connected to the rogue kit, Lavender, that Pineclan had taken in. She must've recently been made an apprentice, making Daisystream realize that her and Turtlefoot had already been gone for nearly three moons. *It's time we returned, maybe within the next half moon. Newleaf will be in full bloom by then.*

Turning her attention back to Spider, she tried to figure out how it was possible that he was talking to Lavenderpaw. *Could he be having a Starclan vision? But that's not possible, he isn't even a clan cat yet let alone a medicine cat.* So what was happening?

"So your... medicine cat, you said?" He paused, listening to a reply. "Medicine cat apprentice. He had a vision from Starclan, who are your dead ancestors, that we should be connecting? But why?"

*So this* does *have to do with Starclan! But why should Spider and Lavenderpaw be connecting? What does it have to do with Pineclan?*

"Wait so your destiny is to protect your clan from an unforeseen danger? How are you supposed to do that when you're so young?" He paused again. "You don't even know? Seems like an impossible task. You think *I'm* a part of your destiny? How could that be?"

Daisystream perked her ears. She remembered moons ago when she'd overheard Junipertwig and the newly apprenticed Strikepaw discussing an omen from Starclan. They had said that Lavenderpaw would have to save the clan or Pineclan would face destruction. She shuddered, remembering how terrified she had felt after hearing that. *What could possible destroy all of Pineclan?*

She was pulled back to the conversation between Spider and Lavenderpaw. "Okay, we'll connect again soon. Bye, Lavenderpaw".

Spider turned around, his eyes stretching wide as he came nose to nose with Daisystream. She stared at him, confused and at a loss for words. Finally she manage to choke out a question. "What *was* that?"

Spider shook his head, looking just as confused. "Somehow I was talking to a *clan* cat! It happened for the first time when you had just arrived here. This is the first time it's happened since then. I don't know how it's even possible".

Daisystream gaped at him. "I don't know either. I've never heard of anything like it! Our passed ancestors usually share with our medicine cats and sometimes the leaders, but never have two *live* cats been able to telepathically communicate with each other".

"It must mean something important, right?" Spider asked quietly, sounding nervous.

Daisystream nodded. "It must be very important for Starclan to send an omen about it. I would never have guessed that your destiny intertwined with the rogue kit Pineclan took in".

"She was a rogue?" Spider asked in confusion.

Daisystream nodded, explaining how Lavender had been found after her mother had been killed by a fox just outside clan territory. She told him about how the kit had hit her head and didn't have any memories, other than her name. Then she explained how Lionstar had wanted to turn her away from joining the clan, but Starclan had sent a message saying that the fate of Pineclan lay in her paws, so she had been adopted by a Pineclan queen. She had been raised beside he kits and had apparently just been apprenticed, showing that the clan had accepted her.

"Wow," Spider murmured. "She's had such a rough life at such a young age. Her mother was killed by a fox and she lost her memory. The fate of a whole clan has been in her paws since she could barely walk. That's a heavy destiny".

Daisystream nodded. "But she's a tough kit, and I bet even more so now that she's an apprentice. We left when she was just over three

moons old, and the fact that she's an apprentice now means we've been gone almost three moons. Newleaf will be here soon, it's time we went home as soon as the snow melts".

Spider nodded, looking nervous. "Do you think the clan will accept me?"

"If we tell the clan all about how you "rescued us from twolegs" and helped me kit, they'll definitely accept you. We wouldn't have survived without you, especially with how tough our kittings were". Daisystream reassured him. "Just remember that you can't tell *anyone* that Silverkit, Mothkit, Echokit, and Fernkit aren't actually mine. And you have to go along with our story about being captured by twolegs".

Spider nodded solemnly. "I promise I will take your secret to the grave. No cat will ever know the truth if I can help it".

Daisystream purred. "Thank you, Spider. You're going to make a wonderful clan cat".

Spider dipped his head, looking sheepish. "Well, if we're going to leave in a half moon we better start building up our strength now, starting with good nights of sleep".

Daisystream nodded, her jaws gaping in a huge yawn as if on cue. She made her way back to her kits, weaving around Turtlefoot's nest on the way. As she passed, the tortoiseshell she-cat raised her head, her eyes blurry with sleep and confusion.

"Daisystream? What're you doing awake?" She mumbled.

Daisystream paused, glancing around to make sure Spider hadn't heard Turtlefoot wake. The black tom had already curled back up in his nest and was breathing deeply, seemingly unaware of the disturbance. Satisfied that he wasn't listening, Daisystream turned back to her friend.

"It's a long story, I'll tell you in the morning". Daisystream whispered quietly.

Turtlefoot nodded, her tired eyes already drooping shut again.

"Sounds like a plan". She muttered, her breaths quickly turning into snores again.

Daisystream sighed, relieved that Turtlefoot hadn't pressed the matter; she was looking forward to going back to her nest and sleeping for a while. Dragging her paws through the mossy flooring of the den, she stumbled back into her nest and curled around her kits. Thawkit trembled happily in her sleep, wrapping one of her paws around Daisystream's neck. The other kits snuggled closer as well, seemingly grateful for her warmth against the leafbare chill. Even Mothkit squirmed towards her in his sleep, and she swept her tail around him. Sighing happily, Daisystream let herself drift into sleep with the scent of her kits wreathing around her.

Daisystream sighed in exasperation as she tried to convince her kits to eat the traveling herbs they had collected. They were starting their journey back to the clans today, and she was already dreading the long journey with six kits and only four warriors to carry them. If they didn't eat their traveling herbs, the journey would be nearly impossible for the kits.

"Come on, just chew them up quickly and swallow. They're not that bad". She tried to encourage them.

"They smell yucky". Echokit complained, sniffing them disdainfully.

"Yeah, they do". Treekit mumbled. "Why do we need them anyway?"

Daisystream's whiskers twitched in annoyance. "You need them to keep your strength up. We're going to our home, Pineclan, and it's very far away".

"How is it our home if we've never even been there?" Fernkit asked inquisitively.

"Turtlefoot and I lived there before you were born, but we got captured by twolegs. Luckily, Spider helped us escape, but we were too far away to travel back while I was heavily pregnant. Then we had to wait until you were big enough to travel and all the snow had melted away". Daisystream explained carefully. They had to make sure that the kits believed the same story they were planning

on telling the clan, or they would expose their lie to everyone.

"What about Petalface? Is she from Pineclan?" Fernkit asked again.

*She's always so full of questions*. "No, Petalface is from a different clan. She was captured by the same twolegs, which is how we ended up all together".

"Is our father in Pineclan?" Thawkit asked excitedly.

"Yes, he is". Daisystream purred. "His name is Stumpleap, and Treekit looks just like him".

At that, Treekit puffed out his chest and stood a little taller, his long black tail sticking straight up in the air. "I can't wait to meet him!" He gasped.

"Then you better eat your herbs so we can get a move on". Daisystream mewed hopefully.

Treekit nodded, wearily eyeing the greens. Then in one quick movement, he gobbled up his pile and swallowed, screwing up his face at the taste. He gagged a little, licking his lips in an attempt to get rid of the taste. "They're not too bad". He choked out.

The other kits nodded, eating their herbs one by one until only Fernkit and Echokit were left. They glared suspiciously at the herbs through slitted green eyes, shaking their heads in disgust. "No way am I eating those". Fernkit mewed firmly.

"Me either". Echokit hissed, her white and brown fur fluffing up in defiance.

Daisystream sighed, her tail drooping in defeat. "Fine, we'll just have to carry you".

"That's okay!" Echokit squeaked, perking up. "We like being carried".

*They are just like their mother, so high maintenance.* Daisystream thought wryly, glancing over at Petalface. The brown and white she-cat too was sniffing at her herbs in disgust, then reluctantly

lapped them up. Her horrified face at the bitter taste just proved to Daisystream how much like her daughters she really was. *But they're not her daughters anymore, they're mine.* She silently reminded herself.

Spider and Turtlefoot had already lapped up their herbs and were standing nearby, ready to go. Daisystream quickly scooped up her pile and winced at the bitter taste. She forced herself to swallow and joined Turtlefoot and Spider. They were staring down at the rushing river, which had only been a small stream when they'd first arrived. All the melting snow had made it swell, and the swift-flowing water threatened to spill over the dirt banks.

"It's a good thing we're leaving". Spider mewed. "It looks like it might flood".

Turtlefoot nodded in agreement. "We know how terrible floods can be, don't we Daisystream?"

Daisystream nodded, shuddering. She had barely been a new apprentice when a flood had swept through the Pineclan camp, killing many warriors and their leader, Darkstar. Daisystream herself had barely escaped. If she never saw another flood again, it would be too soon.

Shaking her thoughts away, Daisystream got to her paws, glancing around at the group of cats and kits. "Well, should we head out?"

Spider hesitated, looking nervous. He pawed nervously at the freshly green grass, turning up soil as he did so. *He must be nervous about leaving his home.* Daisystream mused to herself. Finally he nodded, new determination entering his yellow eyes. "Let's gather up the kits and go".

Daisystream bounded over to the kits, rounding them up with a sweep of her tail. "Mothkit and Silverkit will walk for a while since they are the biggest. If you two get tired, you can climb on one of our backs". The two tom-kits nodded, looking excited about the prospect of not being carried.

Satisfied that they'd be okay walking for at least a little while,

Daisystream continued. "Petalface will carry Fernkit, Spider will carry Treekit, Turtlefoot will carry Echokit, and I will carry Thawkit. Is that okay with everyone?"

Everyone mewed agreement, and Daisystream nodded in satisfaction. She scooped up Thawkit and positioned herself between Mothkit and Silverkit. Spider and Turtlefoot flanked the kits on either side, and Petalface took the lead. They faced the direction of the clans and twolegplace, the sun lighting up their way. The river rushed along beside them, giving them a clear path to follow. Daisystream took a deep breath around Thawkit's scruff, readying herself to go.

"Alright, let's move".

# Chapter 20

"Okay, we'll stop here to rest for the night". Turtlefoot called, setting down Echokit who had been dangling from her jaws. Mothkit slid off of the tortoiseshell she-cat's back, his whiskers drooping in exhaustion. They had been traveling for two sunrises now, and both Mothkit and Silverkit had insisted on walking most of the way. However, their soft paw pads weren't used to traveling so far, and they had become cracked and skinned until they couldn't walk anymore. Though they'd applied dock leaf juice, the kits still complained about the pain, so Turtlefoot and Spider had carried them on their backs until now.

Spider's shoulder sagged as he set down the two kits he was carrying. "They may be small, but they are certainly heavy". He hissed in Turtlefoot's ear.

Turtlefoot nodded, staggering slightly out of exhaustion. "Great Starclan I know, my back feels like it'll never be right again".

Glancing around at their surroundings, Turtlefoot noticed that the birch trees had started to thin out. Her pelt prickled in excitement as she realized that this meant they were nearing Pineclan's territory. Soon, they'd be under the safe sprawl of pine tree branches again. Her heart quickened at the thought; she'd missed their home so much.

Here, the river was even more angry, and water spilled over the bank in spots where the dirt had fallen away or worn down. Turtlefoot shuddered at the sight, her pelt crawling at the thought of having to deal with a flood. "We'd better camp farther from the river. I don't like the looks of those swelling banks". She voiced her concerns aloud.

Daisystream nodded, her tail wrapped protectively around her kits.

"Even if it doesn't overflow, we don't want one of the kits falling into that turbulent water".

"Let's find a spot to camp further away then, before it gets dark". Petalface murmured, casting a worried glance at the sky.

Already the sun had begun to dip below the horizon. Pink rays spilled across the faraway hills, and the area surrounding them was covered in a soft golden light. The nearby twolegplace, much closer now than she'd ever been to it, began to emit a muted orange glow. Shadows were beginning to lengthen, and Turtlefoot could hear night creatures coming out already. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted, and she cast a cautious glance at the surrounding sky. She relaxed as she saw no sign of the owl, who might prey upon the small kits.

The group trudged through the forest, keeping a watchful eye out for predators. Turtlefoot glanced around, searching for a place to camp, and kept her mouth open to draw in the scents of prey. She almost gagged as the scent of the twolegplace overcame her, and she shuddered at the idea of having to go in there. In the morning, her and Daisystream were going to escort Petalface into the twolegplace to find a twoleg den to live in. Turtlefoot shook her head, not understanding why someone would want to give up life as a warrior to become a kittypet. *It's mousebrained,* she thought to herself.

Spider abruptly halted in front of her and lifted his tail to signal the other cats to stop. The group gathered around him to see what he had found. In front of them was a large oak tree with wide, gnarled roots. In between the roots was enough space for several cats to fit comfortably, and the roots were covered with moss, providing cushioning for nests. Turtlefoot sighed, grateful that they had found a relatively cozy spot to settle before dark.

"Okay, Petalface and Daisystream can stay here with the kits while Spider and I go hunt". Turtlefoot instructed, happy that she was able to hunt again. Being heavy with kits, she'd been unable to move stealthily or swiftly enough to hunt well. Then, after she'd kitted, the kits had needed her in the den a lot to nurse them. It had been exhausting, and she couldn't imagine why any she-cat would

want that.

Petalface and Daisystream rounded up all six of the kits, who were stumbling sleepily over their own paws. Daisystream curled up between two of the roots, allowing the kits to pile on top of her. Turtlefoot watched as Silverkit burrowed into the queen's side, nursing contently. *I never would've had that bond with him that he has with Daisystream. I did the right thing by giving him and Mothkit up.*

"Turtlefoot, are you coming?" Spider called, looking at her expectantly.

She nodded and quickly scrambled after him. "Sorry, let's go".

As the two cats padded silently side by side, Turtlefoot got the feeling that Spider wanted to say something, but wasn't sure if he should. She gave him a few moments to figure it out, then sighed in exasperation. "Just spit it out already".

Spider hesitated, then turned his piercing yellow eyes on Turtlefoot. "I saw you watching Silverkit back there. Are you starting to regret giving him and Mothkit up?"

Turtlefoot was startled by the question, and paused before replying. "No," She mewed slowly. "I don't regret it. I wish I could be a good mother to them, but I just can't. When you set Silverkit next to me after he'd just been born, I felt no connection, and I haven't ever since. When Mothkit opened his eyes first, I didn't feel anything; no pride, no love, nothing. I'm just not cut out to be a mother".

Spider shook his head, clearly not understanding her. "I guess some cats just aren't meant to have kits". He mewed at last. "What about your mate? Did he want kits?"

Turtlefoot flinched as if the tom had just swiped his claws over her ear. Clearly sensing that he'd hit a nerve, Spider quickly changed the subject. "I smell rabbit underneath that holly bush. That would feed all of us, and the kits could even try some".

Glad for the change in topic, Turtlefoot nodded. "Good idea. I'll circle around the bush and scare it out towards you".

Spider nodded, crouching down to wait. Slowly, Turtlefoot circled around the bush, careful not to make a sound or let the rabbit scent her. Once she was in position, she signaled to Spider, who signaled back that he was ready. With a ferocious yowl, Turtlefoot raced forward, swiping her paws under the glossy green leaves of the holly bush. The rabbit, clearly startled, shot out the other side of the bush, right into Spider's paws. He killed it with a quick nip to the neck, and stood up with the limp brown body in his mouth.

"Well that was an easy catch!" Spider mewed cheerfully around the mouthful. "I swear rabbits have fur for brains".

Turtlefoot muttered her agreement, then quickly thanked Starclan for the catch. Together they carried the sizable rabbit back to the oak trees. When they arrived, Fernkit and Echokit had already dozed off against Daisystream's flank. Petalface's eyes were drooping shut too, as if she was struggling to stay awake. However, the smell of prey must have roused her, because she leapt to her paws excitedly.

"Wow, great catch!" She mewed. Just then her belly grumbled, and she licked her chest fur in embarrassment. "I'm so hungry my belly thinks my throats been torn out".

"Well go ahead and eat, there's plenty for everyone". Turtlefoot mewed encouragingly, nudging the rabbit towards the brown and white she-cat.

She blinked gratefully at her and dipped her head to take a bite. Daisystream had roused the kits by now and slipped out of the makeshift nest to eat. She took a mouthful and groaned happily. "Rabbit is my favorite!" She exclaimed.

"Can we try?" Thawkit squeaked boldly.

Spider purred in amusement. "Of course, you can all have some".

The kits excitedly began tearing mouthfuls off of the rabbit. They were still so small that it didn't take long for them to get full bellies, and they contentedly curled back up into the makeshift nest, letting out large yawns. One by one, they all fell asleep and began gently

snoring. Soon Daisystream joined them, her jaws parted in a huge yawn.

"Thanks Turtlefoot, Spider. That rabbit was delicious". She purred gratefully. With that, she curled around her kits and began snoring as well.

Once Petalface had finished eating and curled up to sleep, Turtlefoot settled down to eat her portion of the rabbit. Spider set next to her, munching away at the prey. The rabbit was indeed delicious, and Turtlefoot was glad they had caught it. After going hungry all leafbare, it was nice to have a full belly in newleaf.

When her belly was fully satisfied and Spider was licking his jaws clean, Turtlefoot buried the remains of the rabbit. "We can eat the rest of it in the morning".

Spider nodded sleepily in agreement, then wordlessly settled down in the roots of the oak to sleep. Turtlefoot followed suit, curling up close to Daisystream for warmth. Silverkit's tiny gray paw landed on her flank, and Turtlefoot purred. She was perfectly content watching them be cute, as long as she didn't actually have to care for them.

*I made the right decision,* Turtlefoot reassured herself for the millionth time as she slipped into sleep. *There's no doubt about it.*

Turtlefoot stretched, her stomach full with the leftover rabbit from the night before. She swiped her tongue over lips, wishing they had time to catch more prey.  But the sun was already rising in the sky, and she knew they'd have to get Petalface to the twolegplace quickly if they wanted to return to their clan today.

She reluctantly got to her paws, staring in the direction of the twoleg place. She had never been in one before, but older warriors had described it to her as loud and stinky. They said there were twolegs, dogs, and monsters everywhere, as well as unfriendly kittypets. Turtlefoot shuddered, wondering again why Petalface had decided to be a kittypet.

She could only catch a glimpse of the twoleg place through the

trees. From what she could see, this twoleg place mostly had small clusters of twoleg dens and thin thunderpaths, nothing like the huge ones the older warriors had told her about. *Maybe this twoleg place won't be as scary,* Turtlefoot thought hopefully.

"Well, are we going?" Petalface asked, pacing impatiently.

Turtlefoot nodded, and Daisystream stood up next to her, looking reluctant. "I guess so". The white she-cat murmured.

"Mother, why do you have to leave?" Treekit wailed.

Daisystream purred, gently silencing Treekit with her tail. "I'll only be gone for a bit, and then I'll come right back. We just have to take care of something before we return to the clan, okay?"

Turtlefoot nodded in agreement. They had decided not to tell the kits that Petalface was going to become a kittypet. Petalface didn't want her clanmates to know that she was going to live with twolegs willingly, so Turtlefoot and Daisystream were going to tell everyone that she had been captured again and was unable to escape this time. They had to tell the kits the same story, or they'd tell the clans the truth.

"Don't worry, you get to hang out with me while they're gone!" Spider meowed encouragingly. "I can show all of you the hunters crouch, and how to stalk!"

The kits all immediately brightened and began mewling excitedly. "Teach me first!" Thawkit gasped pleadingly.

"No me!" Mothkit barged in front of the smaller she-kit, his eyes narrowed with determination. "I'll be the best hunter ever!"

Spider purred in amusement. "You'll all get your turn".

Daisystream blinked at him gratefully, and Turtlefoot gazed at him in admiration. *How does he handle the kits so well? I'd never be able to do that. It's too bad he lost his only kit, he'd be a great father. Maybe he'll have a family once he settles into Pineclan,* she thought hopefully.

"Well if that's all settled, we should be on our way". Petalface

mewed, unable to contain a little bounce of excitement.

Suddenly the brown and white she-cat's eyes filled with sorrow as she gazed at Fernkit and Echokit. Though the kits didn't know she was their mother, it had never stopped Petalface from loving them fiercely. Turtlefoot could tell that it hurt her to watch Daisystream raise them, and she flinched every time they called the white she-cat "mother".

Petalface padded up to Fernkit, giving the little red she-kit a gentle lick between the ears. Then she turned to Echokit, rubbing her chin along the kit's little cheek, ruffling her white fur as she did so. Looking too choked up to say goodbye, Petalface wordlessly turned and marched towards the twolegplace, her eyes misty.

# Chapter 21

Starlingwing stared at Lavenderpaw anxiously as the little silver she-cat sat with her eyes closed, muttering quietly. Junipertwig had insisted on waking the apprentice up in the middle of the night after both Strikpaw and Starlingwing had ominous dreams about her. The medicine cat seemed to think that Lavenderpaw connecting with Spider was urgent, and couldn't wait until morning.

"Okay, I'll talk to you some other time Spider. Bye". Lavenderpaw finally meowed.

Her blue eyes snapped open and she looked startled. "That was a much longer conversation than the first time we talked. I could still only see his eyes, bright yellow".

"What did he say?" Junipertwig asked urgently. "Anything important?"

Lavenderpaw shrugged. "Not really".

"Are you sure that's what the dreams meant?" That was Lionstar's voice. The medicine cats had notified him about the dreams and asked for permission to let Lavenderpaw talk to Spider. He had seemed dubious, but wearily agreed.

"Yes, I'm pretty sure". Junipertwig nodded.

"Well, maybe it's not meant to happen yet". Strikepaw reasoned. "Perhaps we should just let Lavenderpaw continue connecting with Spider, until we figure out what the omen means".

Starlingwing sighed, letting her mind wander as the medicine cats

discussed what they should do. She looked up at the sky, a dark blue stretch with no clouds in sight. Starclan winked down at her, and she gazed at the twinkling lights imploringly. *Please give us some more guidance.* She waited anxiously for some type of a sign, but nothing disturbed the still night.

"Mother?" Starlingwing was jerked out of her thoughts as Lavenderpaw whispered in her ear.

"Yes dear?" She whispered back, moving closer to her daughter.

"I'm scared, why am I so important all the sudden?" Lavenderpaw's blue eyes stared up at her, round with terror.

Starlingwing gave her a comforting lick around her ear. "I'm not sure, but there's no need to be frightened. Everything will work out in the end, you'll see". She mewed reassuringly. But inwardly, Starlingwing wasn't sure that was true.

*Alright, enough is enough. Lavenderpaw is scared and she needs sleep. Starclan knows how hard Alderbush is pushing her in training,* Starlingwing thought to herself with annoyance. "Okay, I think it's time for Lavenderpaw to go back to her nest. We can discuss this another time, when things seem clearer hopefully". She shot a meaningful glance at Junipertwig.

"Oh, yes of course. We can all gather tomorrow to discuss it further". Junipertwig nodded, seeming to notice for the first time how scared Lavenderpaw looked. "How about I give you a poppyseed to help you sleep better?"

Lavenderpaw nodded, relief showing in her blue gaze. "I'd like that. I'm tired, but I think I'm too worried to sleep".

"I'll go fetch one". Strikepaw volunteered, hopping to his paws and trotting towards the medicine cats den.

"Thank you, Strikepaw". Junipertwig called after him. The apprentice waved his black and white tail in acknowledgment before slipping through the den entrance.

While Strikepaw was getting a poppyseed, Starlingwing gently

steered Lavenderpaw back to the apprentices den. She could tell that her daughter was overwhelmed by the destiny she had been given, and Starlingwing couldn't blame her. She was so worried about her daughter, and whether or not she'd be able to fulfill the prophecy and go on to live a normal life.

After she had settled the apprentice back into her nest and Strikepaw had given her a poppyseed, Starlingwing padded slowly back to the nursery. She carefully curled herself around her three kits, who were all sleeping soundly. Looking down at them, she found herself wondering whether or not they would have difficult destinies as well. *What if Gladekit is destined to die protecting her clan? What if Shadowkit is destined to become leader someday?* Starlingwing had almost believed that Shadowkit was destined to die as a kit after her sickly start. But, she had gotten better and was growing just as fast as her littermates. *What if Slykit is destined to switch clans? What if* I'm *destined to die of some illness, and my kits have to grow up without a mother?*

She shook her head, trying to clear the thoughts from her mind. Still, they persisted, and she found herself wide awake by the time the sky outside began to turn red. Midnightfur had always told her that she worried too much, and perhaps he was right. But how could she not, given what had happened to her mother when she was young?

Starlingwing sighed as she remembered Berrywhisker. Her mother had been the most beautiful cat, with soft tabby fur and deep brown eyes. She only remembered her dimly, after she had died in a battle when Starlingwing, then Starlingpaw, was only a young apprentice. However, she could very clearly remember her death. When Oakclan invaded their camp in the middle of the night, Starlingwing's mentor had ordered her to hide in some bushes until the battle was over. As she hid, she saw a large tom pounce on Berrywhisker from behind. He had raked his claws across her throat, then raced away and left her to die. Gripped by horror and fear, Starlingwing had raced across the clearing to try and save her mother. As she desperately attempted to stop the bleeding, her mother had gently stopped her and whispered into her ear, "this was my destiny, so let me go".

Ever since then, Starlingwing had hated hearing the word "destiny". Nobody should have to die a meaningless death just because it was their destiny. Now, her adopted daughter was involved in a huge destiny that the safety of their clan rested on. What if she couldn't fulfill it? What if she died in the process? Starlingwing didn't think she could handle losing another family remember.

As Starlingwing's thoughts tumbled around in her head, she was too distracted to notice that the sun was almost all the way up by now. She was startled when Shadowkit sat up and stretched until her tail shivered. The little black she-kit turned to her and blinked up at her with big green eyes.

"Where were you last night mother?" She squeaked. "I woke up and you were gone".

Starlingwing hesitated, not knowing how to answer. "Well, I had a strange dream and needed to go tell Junipertwig and Strikepaw about it".

"What kind of dream?" This time the question came from Gladekit, who was blinking awake beside her sister.

"A dream about a prophecy, involving your sister Lavenderpaw". Starlingwing sighed. "She has a big destiny".

"Wow, that's so cool". Slykit, who had now woken up as well, gasped. "What's her destiny? Is she going to fight a lion, or protect the clan from the sky falling?"

Starlingwing purred in amusement. "You listen to way too many stories from the elders. No, she's hopefully not going to fight a lion or stop the sky from falling. But the fate of the clan does depend on her, we just don't know what that means right now".

The kits began excitedly chattering amongst themselves about what Lavenderpaw's fate may be. Starlingwing inwardly groaned, wondering if she had done the right thing by telling her kits about their sister's fate. But deep down she knew she had; if she hadn't told them, they would've just kept asking questions until they eventually dragged it out of her. Better they know now, so that they

can process the information properly.

Standing up to stretch, Starlingwing realized how stiff she was from her long, sleepless night. *I need to stretch my legs. I should leave camp, just for a bit.* "How would you kits like to hang out with Owlsneeze for a bit?"

"But you *just* said that we listen to too many stories from the elders". Slykit muttered.

Starlingwing rolled her eyes. "I was only joking. Come on, it'll be fun".

Gladekit hopped to her paws, eyes gleaming with excitement. "Needlenose was telling me a story last time we were there but never got to finish it. Maybe she'll tell me the ending this time! It was about how her and Archtooth scared a badger away from their kit after she snuck out of camp!"

Starlingwing couldn't help but laugh at that. She had been a kit at the same time as Needlenose and Archtooth's kit, Olivepatch, then Olivekit. She remembered the dark gray she-cat whispering to her that she was going to sneak out of camp to explore the forest. Starlingwing, then Starlingkit, had warned her that it was a bad idea, but she hadn't listened. Starlingkit had been so worried that she'd woken her mother and told her where Olivekit had went. Her mother warned Needlenose that her kit had snuck out, and she and her mate had left to bring her back. Luckily, they found her just before a hungry badger was about to attack her. They scared it off and brought her back to camp, where Olivekit had sheepishly thanked Starlingkit for telling someone where she'd gone. They'd been close friends ever since then.

*Maybe I'll ask Olivepatch to come on a walk with me if she's not busy,* Starlingwing mused while she walked her kits over to the elders den. *It would be nice to have some company. Plus, we haven't talked in ages, not since I had my kits and everything in the clan got so crazy.*

Starlingwing thanked her father for watching the kits, then scanned the clearing for her friend's gray pelt. Her fur pricked with excitement as she noticed her by the freshkill pile, sharing a vole

with her mate, Frogclaw. She trotted over to her, waving her tail in greeting.

"Hey, Olivepatch!" She called as she got closer.

"Starlingwing! How have you been?" The she-cat mewed happily, while Frogclaw nodded to her.

"Good, just feeling a little cooped up in the nursery". She sighed, and Olivepatch nodded in understanding. "Would you like to come for a walk with me?"

The gray warrior's ears perked up happily. "I'd love to, just let me finish my vole real quick". She quickly gulped down the last few mouthfuls and leapt to her paws. "Lead the way!"

Starlingwing quickly slipped through the log tunnel with her friend right behind her. As they exited the camp and entered the forest, the tabby queen paused to take in the beautiful pine forest. She took a deep breath of fresh air and sighed happily. It had been moons since she'd been in the forest. The ferns were still shriveled from leafbare, but Starlingwing could see fresh green growth starting to uncurl. Buds were appearing on bushes, and new leaves were starting to sprout from bare tree branches. Soon, the whole forest would be in bloom.

"Wow, I didn't know how much I missed being out in the forest until now". Starlingwing gasped.

Olivepatch nodded knowingly. "I was the same way when my kits were still in the nursery. But I always snuck out when they were sleeping, to get some fresh air and take in the beauty of the forest".

Starlingwing purred. "You always have liked to sneak out".

Olivepatch shook her head in amusement. "I wish Needlenose would stop telling that story. I was only 5 moons old, I didn't know any better".

"Well, I did tell you it was a bad idea". Starlingwing reminded her, a mischievous edge to her voice.

"You always were a worry wart". Olivepatch shot back, giving Starlingwing a playful shove.

"That is true, even now". Starlingwing sighed.

Olivepatch tilted her head in concern. "Is everything okay?"

Starlingwing hesitated, not knowing how much of the information she should divulge to her friend. But suddenly, the whole story just poured out of her. How Strikepaw had a dream about Lavenderpaw's destiny to save the clan, how Lavenderpaw had been telepathically connecting with a strange loner cat, how it seemed that Starclan *wanted* them to connect, and finally how the clan would face a terrible fate unless Lavenderpaw could stop it.

Olivepatch's mouth gaped open as Starlingwing rambled on. Once she was done with the story, the dark gray she-cat looked at a loss for words. Finally, she shook herself and faced Starlingwing, a serious look in her eyes. "If Starclan has predicted that Lavenderpaw will save the clan from a terrible fate, then she *will* save the clan. She can do it, you just have to believe in her".

And for the first time since finding out about Lavenderpaw's fate, Starlingwing finally felt at peace, if only just a bit.

# Chapter 22

Daisystream shifted uncomfortably as her and Turtlefoot padded behind Petalface. They had just entered twolegplace, and already she was itching to leave. Turtlefoot seemed to share her discomfort, and kept a watchful eye on their surroundings as they walked. However, Petalface looked relaxed and comfortable. She seemed excited to be here, and to become a kittypet. Daisystream shuddered. *I don't know how.*

They padded along the side of a thunderpath, following its winding curves through the twolegplace. The grass here was short and hurt her paws, but there was longer grass next to the tall wooden things called fences that surrounded the twoleg dens. Suddenly a loud roar sounded, and a monster skidded out of a smaller thunderpath leading to a twoleg den. It rolled onto the bigger thunderpath and began speeding away. Daisystream leaped backwards into the tall grass, quickly followed by her friends. When it had passed, they hesitantly stepped back out into the open.

"Do you think it saw us?" She asked breathlessly.

"No, I don't think so". Turtlefoot murmured.

"I don't think monsters leave the thunderpaths anyway". Petalface mewed briskly. "Come on, let's keep walking. I wanna find a twoleg before dark".

Reluctantly, Daisystream followed the brown and white she-cat further into the twolegplace. Every hair on her pelt stood up as twoleg scents washed over her. They passed a silver twoleg boulder and Daisystream gagged as the scent of crowfood hit her nose. Standing on her hind legs, she peeked inside and saw rotting food along with other twoleg items. She gagged again and quickly hurried away from it.

They hadn't gone much farther when a flourish of barking erupted from behind them. Dread seeped through Daisystream as she turned around and saw a huge black dog galloping towards them. "Run!" She screeched, racing towards the nearest twoleg den. As quick as she could, she scrambled up the fence surrounding the den. She balanced precariously on top, and the wood swayed as her friends clambered up next to her. Daisystream held her breath as the dog leapt up on its hind legs. *Will it be able to reach us?* She let out her breath as she realized they were up high enough, and they were just out of reach.

After a moment, a pair of twolegs came rushing around the corner looking frantically around. The female twoleg was holding some kind of broken tendril in her hand, and pointed excitedly when she saw the dog. Both twolegs rushed over and grabbed the dog by a shorter tendril around its neck. The dog whined and pulled back towards the cats insistently. The twolegs looked up, following the dogs gaze, and seemed to see the cats for the first time.

Daisystream froze as the twolegs stared at them, and Turtlefoot let out a quiet hiss. Petalface shot them both warning glances, then meowed welcomingly to the twolegs. She had instructed them *not* to be rude to twolegs if they were approached, in case they wanted to take Petalface in. *Fine, I won't hiss at them or hurt them, but I will* not *let them touch me or pick me up,* she thought adamantly to herself.

The female twoleg approached the cats, reaching out her paw to Daisystream. She sunk away in disgust, giving the twoleg a warning glare. Turtlefoot did the same, huddling closer to Daisystream to escape the twoleg's reach. Looking disappointed, the twoleg turned to Petalface with a hopeful look. Petalface gladly bumped her head against the twoleg's paw and began purring as the twoleg scratched her ears. The twoleg let out a yelp of happiness and tentatively tried to pick up Petalface. Daisystream saw the other she-cat stiffen a bit, but relaxed as the twoleg held her against her chest and began cooing at her.

The male twoleg held the dog back as the female twoleg continued to pet Petalface. The twolegs appeared to be having some kind of heated conversation, and the male looked concerned, pointing at

the dog. The female shook her head, shrugging and continuing to pet Petalface. The she-cat looked very content now, her eyes half-closed as she purred. Finally the twolegs seemed to come to an agreement, and the male nodded reluctantly. Happily, the female twoleg began walking towards the male, still holding Petalface.

Concerned, Daisystream and Turtlefoot followed them at a distance. Petalface had made them promise to see her off into her new twoleg den, so they stuck close behind the twolegs and their dog. However, they fell behind a bit, and when they rounded the next corner a large tom cat blocked their path; the twolegs were already quite far down the thunderpath and hadn't seemed to notice the tom.

He was a plump tabby, obviously a kittypet, but Daisystream could see hard muscle rippling under his pelt. She shifted uncomfortably, but tried to make her face non-threatening. Turtlefoot moved closer to her protectively, standing slightly in front of her. "Sorry to intrude, we're just passing through if you'd let us by". Daisystream mewed calmly, attempting to go around him.

The tom moved in front of her again, snarling. "I'm not letting you go any farther. You'll steal my mice like all the other cats".

"*Your* mice?" Turtlefoot mewed in confusion. "Is this your territory or something?"

The tom shifted awkwardly. "Well, no. But my housefolk lives right over there by that barn. The barn belongs to my housefolk and is full of mice. All the cats around here try to steal them, but they can't have them! They're on my housefolk's territory, so they're mine". He spat furiously.

"Look, we don't want to steal your mice. We can hunt for ourselves elsewhere. We're just following our friend, she's with those twolegs up there". Daisystream nodded up the thunderpath, where the twolegs had almost disappeared.

"Yeah right. Those housefolk only have one cat, and she never leaves their yard. You're just trying to trick me so you can come steal my mice! Well I'm not going to let you" He hissed menacingly, moving forward threateningly.

Daisystream sighed in exasperation, bracing herself for a fight. She knew that she'd normally be able to defeat a kittypet, but her and Turtlefoot had both kitted only moons ago, and they were tired from traveling. This tom was also particularly big and menacing.

The tom had bunched up his back legs and was preparing to pounce when the bushes next to him rustled. Another tabby tom with a brown spot on his nose padded out, looking at the other tom with an annoyed expression on his face. "Toby, are you starting trouble again?" He growled. This tom was even plumper than the one named "Toby", and appeared to be younger as well.

"It's none of your business Toffee". Toby growled back, preparing to pounce once again.

"No, but it is *my* business". An authoritative voice rang out from the bushes, and a thin elder tom slid out into the open. He was almost all white with a tabby tail, and Daisystream could tell that he was much older than the other two toms.

Toby immediately dipped his head apologetically to the elder and took a pace back. "I'm sorry Scruff, but I caught these two she-cats trying to steal our mice".

The elder tilted his head quizzically. "I don't see any mice with them".

"Well, no, but they were headed in the direction of the barn. You know cats try to steal our prey all the time". Toby muttered, scuffling his paws in embarrassment.

"Who cares if they take mice? The barn has plenty to go around". Scruff shrugged, then turned to Daisystream and Turtlefoot. "Were you two looking to hunt?"

Turtlefoot shook her head, seeming to relax next to Daisystream. "We were just following our friend. She went with some twolegs in that direction". She pointed her tail down the thunderpath, and Daisystream nodded in agreement.

"But those were Cheryl's housefolk. You know she's their only cat

and never leaves their territory". Toby complained.

Toffee, the younger tom cat, rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Their friend could be Cheryl's housefolk's *new* cat. You know Cheryl has been wanting a friend, especially since she can't play with that dumb dog of their's because he's too big and clumsy".

"Yes, and I seem to remember that at one point I was our housefolk's only cat. Then they brought you, Toby, and then Toffee. They got new cats, why couldn't Cheryl's housefolks?" Scruff asked sternly.

Toby dropped his head, staring at the ground and shuffling his paws in the dirt. "I guess". He mumbled. "Fine, I'll let them pass. But they better stay away from the barn".

"We will, don't worry". Turtlefoot mewed dryly, and Daisystream followed her as she skirted the toms widely.

Daisystream sighed as she realized the twolegs had disappeared with Petalface and the dog. "Now we'll have to follow their scent, which could take a while. I want to get back to the kits before dark". She mewed worriedly to Turtlefoot.

"Why don't we show you the way?" Toffee mewed brightly. "We know how to get to Cheryl's den. We go there to keep her company and take her a mouse once in a while".

"Yes, that sounds like a great idea. Toby, why don't you go catch Cheryl a mouse?" Scruff suggested.

Toby seemed to brighten at this idea, and he flicked his tail happily. "Okay, I'll be right back!"

He raced off into the taller grass, and returned not long after with a mouse dangling from his jaws. "The mice are so plentiful during newleaf". He mewed around the prey.

"And you were worried about these cats stealing some". Toffee rolled his eyes, padding down the thunderpath. "Come on, it's this way".

"Thank you, this is really kind of you". Daisystream mewed to him and Scruff as they trotted along.

"Oh no worries, it's the least we can do after Toby almost tore your fur off". Toffee mewed over his shoulder.

"I'd like to see him try". Turtlefoot growled, glaring at the tabby tom.

He glared back, baring his teeth. He turned around angrily and padded ahead of the group, flicking his tail in disdain. Scruff shook his head and turned to the two she-cats. "Don't mind Toby. Ever since our housefolks brought him home as a kitten, he's always been prickly. He used to chase my tail and bite my ears when he was young. Of course, I was younger then, so it didn't bother me much".

Daisystream purred in amusement. "Don't worry, we're used to crabby toms. We live with a whole bunch back in our clan".

"Yeah, like your brother Elkgust". Turtlefoot giggled.

"Hey, he is not crabby". Daisystream paused, then laughed. "Actually, he is, you're right".

"What's a clan?" Scruff asked curiously. "And what kind of a name is Elkgust?"

"Our clan is our home. A bunch of cats, we're called warriors, live, hunt, and fight together. We protect and feed our kits, queens, and elders, and follow our leader. There are 5 clans, and we all have our own territory. Elkgust is a clan name, and we have names like that too. I'm Daisystream, and this is Turtlefoot".

"That's so interesting. I've never heard of clans before, or heard names like yours. I've only met housecats or rogues around here". Scruff murmured. "If you live in clans, what are you two and your friend doing here?"

"Our friend, Petalface, doesn't want to be a clan cat anymore". Turtlefoot explained awkwardly. "She thinks it's too hard of a life. She came here to find a twoleg to live with and become a kittypet".

Scruff nodded. "I used to be a rogue. Having housefolks is a much easier life. I understand where she's coming from. It's nice to hunt only for enjoyment and not out of need. My housefolk always feed me, so I don't have to worry if I don't catch anything now".

"I guess". Turtlefoot mumbled. "I couldn't imagine living with twolegs".

"Well, Toffee, Toby, and I don't actually live in our housefolk's den. We sleep outside, except in leafbare; then she brings us in. Most of the time she just brings us food and water, gives us comfy pelts to lay on, and pets us". Scruff shrugged. "It works well for us".

"Still, I can't imagine a twoleg touching me". Daisystream shuddered.

Scruff nodded understandingly, and the group of cats fell into silence as they walked. They finally made it to the end of the thunderpath, and a large white fence rose up in front of them. Toby and Toffee slipped under the fence first, then Scruff ushered Daisystream and Turtlefoot after them. He followed, and Daisystream noticed that he had trouble squeezing under it and standing back up. *He must be many, many moons old,* she thought worriedly to herself.

As she looked around on the other side of the fence, she found herself in a lush garden. There were bushes, flowers, trees, and grass wherever she looked. The only bare patch was a stone path leading up to the large twoleg den. *Wow, this is surprisingly beautiful for twoleg territory,* she thought in awe.

Just then an excited squeal came from under one of the bushes. A plump, fluffy calico she-cat slipped out, and her green eyes flashed happily. She was staring directly at Toby and the mouse he had brought, and she swiped her tongue around her lips. "Is that for me?"

Toby purred, looking a little flustered. "Of course, Cheryl. You know I always bring one for you when I come to visit".

"You're so sweet". Cheryl whispered, licking his ear lovingly.

Daisystream and Turtlefoot exchanged a knowing glance. "They must be new mates". She whispered quietly to the tortoiseshell she-cat.

Turtlefoot nodded, then began looking around. "Where do you suppose Petalface is?"

Cheryl looked up from her mouse. "Oh, the new cat my housefolks brought home? They're on the porch getting to know each other. She seems so nice, I'm really excited to have a friend here".

"What's a porch?" Daisystream asked in confusion.

"It's just around the corner of the den. It's this wooden thing my housefolks like to sit on. I'm not sure why but it seems to make them happy". Cheryl shrugged, going back to her mouse.

Daisystream nodded and headed around the den. "Thank you!" She called as her and Turtlefoot padded away.

As they rounded the corner, they heard loud purrs from Petalface and cooing from the twolegs. When they stepped onto the "porch", Petalface noticed them and her face lit up. She leapt from the lap of the male twoleg and trotted over to them. The twolegs stared at Daisystream and Turtlefoot hopefully, but didn't try to pet them anymore, just watched.

"These twolegs are the sweetest. And I love Cheryl, their other cat. She seems so excited to become friends". Petalface chirped bubbly.

"Yeah, we just met her. She seems great, though I'm not sure about her mate, Toby". Turtlefoot grumbled.

"Oh I didn't know she had a mate! Does he live here?" Petalface asked.

"No, he lives down the thunderpath. Apparently him and his friends visit all the time". Daisystream explained. Then she noticed the setting sun and sighed. *We have to go.* "Petalface... if you're alright here, do you mind if we go back to the kits?"

Petalface looked crestfallen, but she nodded. "I knew it would be

hard to say goodbye, but not this hard. I'm really going to miss you two. Will you come visit?" She asked hopefully.

Daisystream and Turtlefoot both nodded. "Absolutely, the next time we get the chance we'll be here".

Petalface blinked at them gratefully. "Thank you". She whispered. "I suppose you should get going, before it gets dark".

Daisystream nodded reluctantly, touching her nose to the brown and white she-cat's ear affectionately. "Goodbye, Petalface. May Starclan light your path".

Turtlefoot stepped up, licking the other she-cat's head gently. "May Starclan light your path". She repeated.

Petalface blinked at them sadly, affection brimming in her eyes. "And your's".

As Daisystream and Turtlefoot padded away, she felt her chest tighten. She was sure that Petalface was making the wrong decision, but she couldn't stop her from doing it. Then she realized that this meant Echokit and Fernkit were truly hers. Petalface wouldn't constantly be looking at them with such a longing look that Daisystream was sure the kits would figure out she was their mother one day. She would never have to worry about the kits finding out now. It was selfish, but she was relieved.

# Chapter 23

Turtlefoot blinked open her eyes as the sky above her brightened. She sat up groggily and looked around at the gnarled oak tree roots in confusion. *This isn't the warriors den.* Then she remembered the journey she'd been on and sighed. They'd planned to return yesterday after dropping Petalface off, but it had gotten too late, so they had decided to stay here another night. *I miss being home, but we'll get there today*, she reminded herself.

She stood up and stretched, her tortoiseshell tail quivering as she did so. Glancing around, she saw that Spider, Daisystream, and the kits were all still sleeping. *Well, I might as well hunt before they wake up.* Turtlefoot padded into the nearby forest, checking for prey scents as she went. Her mind drifted back to the previous night, and how they had returned without Petalface. The kits had been confused, but accepted the story of her getting captured by twolegs without much fuss; they were really still too young to understand the situation.

Turtelfoot shook her head, clearing thoughts of Petalface from her mind. She missed her, but couldn't dwell on it. Petalface had made her choice, and now all Turtlefoot needed to focus on was getting home. Turning her focus back to hunting, she decided to check by the riverbank in case there were any voles. Slipping through the underbrush, she was shocked to find herself stepping in water. *What in the name of Starclan is going on? I shouldn't be even close to the river yet.*

Emerging from the bushes, she was shocked to see that the river had completely flooded, and water was rushing down the hill in torrents. *Oh no, Pineclan is going to flood again! We need to get home and warn everyone!*

Turtlefoot turned tail and raced back to their makeshift camp. As

she got closer, she saw that Spider had woken up, but Daisystream and the kits were still asleep. Spider saw her approaching and raised his tail in greeting. "Everything alright?"

The tortoiseshell she-cat slowed as she reached him, pausing to catch her breath before explaining. "The river is flooding! A few newleafs back our whole camp flooded because the river overfilled and it killed our leader along with many other cats. We have to hurry home and warn them!"

"Show me the flooding". Spider mewed urgently, beginning to race in the direction of the riverbank.

Turtlefoot ran ahead of him, pulling up short as water rose around her paws. Alarm set her fur on end as she realized it had risen even higher now. Spider gulped beside her, seeming to realize just how dire the situation was.

He turned to face her, his yellow eyes urgent. "Look, last time I saw the river this flooded, it was followed by a huge rush of melting snow that was so powerful it knocked down trees and wiped out a whole twoleg nest. We don't have enough time to get to your clanmates before that happens again. I need to connect with Lavenderpaw and warn her before it's too late".

"Wait, what? What do you mean? How could you "connect" with a Pineclan member?" Turtlefoot asked, confusion clouding her brain.

"I don't have time to explain. I already told Daisystream all about it, and I'll tell you later, but right now I have to act quickly".

Turtlefoot watched as Spider stilled, closing his eyes and appearing to focus intently. Suddenly his eyes snapped open, his gaze intense, though on what Turtlefoot couldn't figure out. "Lavenderpaw, I need you to listen to me. The river is flooding, and Pineclan needs to leave the camp *now*. If they don't, it'll injure many cats, or worse. You must hurry, tell your leader". Spider paused as if listening, then nodded. "Thank you, I hope you make it in time".

Turtlefoot gaped at him. "Were you actually talking to Lavenderpaw?"

Spider nodded, turning back in the direction of their makeshift camp. "I'll explain on the way back. We have to warn Daisystream and get the kits to safety though".

Turtlefoot followed closely behind the black tom, listening as he explained his odd connection with Lavenderpaw and how he is intertwined with her destiny to save the clan. "At first I didn't get how a young cat could save a whole clan, or how I was a part of it. But now I understand. Our connection is going to save the clan because I was able to warn them about the flood. I just hope I did it in time". He mewed worriedly.

"But why you?" Turtlefoot murmured, not quite understanding. "You're not a clan cat, why would Starclan involve you in Pineclan's destiny? And why are you able to connect with a clan apprentice?"

Spider shook his head. "I don't know. I may never find out".

Turtlefoot was about to respond when she felt a rush of cold water around her paws. Panic flared through her pelt as she realized that the river was rising even faster than she could've imagined. She glanced at Spider, whose eyes were wide with fear. "We need to run".

The two cats began racing through the forest, dodging around trees and through bushes. The water rushed behind them like it was chasing them, occasionally catching their tail tips. As they neared the oak tree they were staying in, Turtlefoot let out a loud shriek. "Daisystream! Wake up!"

The warrior rounded a holly bush to find Daisystream looking around in confusion. Her eyes met Turtlefoot's terrified gaze, and she leaped to her paws. "What's going on?"

"The river is flooding, we need to get to higher ground! Grab the kits!" Spider yowled.

Turtlefoot snatched up Silverkit and ushered Mothkit onto her back, ignoring his protests that he could walk on his own. Spider tossed Echokit onto his back and grabbed Treekit in his jaws, while Daisystream grabbed both Fernkit and Thawkit in her's. The three

raced away, from the fast approaching water, heading for twolegplace. There, Turtlefoot knew there would be plenty of structures they could climb onto to escape the water.

They slowed as they reached twolegplace and searched for shelter. "There!" Spider yowled, pointing at a smaller, flat-topped twoleg den positioned next to a bigger twoleg den.

Turtlefoot ran to the side of the den and set Mothkit and Silverkit down. She quickly scaled the side and leaned over the edge. "Hand the kits up to me!" She called down.

Spider stretched up onto his hind legs with Treekit still in his jaws, and Turtlefoot leaned over as far as she could. She dug her teeth delicately into the kit's scruff and hauled him onto the twoleg den. Spider handed her kit after kit until only Mothkit was left. As she clamped her jaws around Mothkit's scruff she was surprised by his size. She teetered on the edge, struggling to pull him up and worried that she was going to topple over. Daisystream saw her predicament and quickly leaped onto the den, grabbing Turtlefoot and hauling her and Mothkit back. Spider followed quickly afterwards, just before water reached where they had perviously been standing.

"Phew, we made it". Turtlefoot sighed, quickly counting to make sure each kit was on the den.

"What about Pineclan?" Daisystream mewed fretfully. "The camp is going to flood!"

"Don't worry, I connected with Lavenderpaw and warned her about it. I just hope I did it in time". Spider mewed.

"So that's how Lavenderpaw was supposed to save Pineclan, and how you were involved". Daisystream murmured thoughtfully. "What if she doesn't warn everyone in time though?"

"I really hope she does". Turtlefoot sighed, thinking of her family back in the clan. She missed her parents and siblings fiercely, but most of all her sister Ivysprout. She had never been away from her for this long. They even slept next to each other in the warriors den.

It would be nice to see her again, hopefully she was safe from the flood.

"You two have family in Pineclan?" Spider asked sympathetically.

Turtlefoot nodded. "My parents, Russettail and Sprucesky, and my littermates, Jayflight and Ivysprout".

Daisystream nodded as well. "My parents, Astertuft and Cloudrun, my littermates, Elkgust and Leafstorm, and my other siblings Frogclaw and Swanfur. They both have kits, so they're my kin as well, although Frogclaw's kits are older than me. I have a lot of kin in Pineclan actually".

"Well I hope they all made it to safety". Spider mewed. He hesitated, then opened his mouth to speak again. "Do you think it will be weird for me not to have any kin in the clan?"

Turtlefoot shook her head. "No, I don't think so. My parents didn't originally live in Pineclan. They were a rogue couple who joined because they wanted a safer environment to have kits in. That's why I don't have much kin in Pineclan".

"And you could always start a family in Pineclan". Daisystream mewed encouragingly.

Spider shook his head. "I don't know. I loved my mate Silver so strongly that I don't think I could ever love a she-cat that much again. And if I ever had kits again, I'd feel like I was betraying her and my kit".

Turtlefoot stroked his side with her tail comfortingly. "I think she'd want you to be happy". She whispered.

Spider shrugged, looking upset. "Maybe". He quickly shook his head, trying to brighten his expression. "Anyway, what do you think of the view from all the way up here kits?"

"We're so high up!" Mothkit squealed. "I love it!"

"Where'd all that water come from?" Treekit asked inquisitively.

Turtlefoot watched as Spider explained the flood to the kits. Their eyes widened in awe as he described the last flood he'd seen that had knocked over trees. They were always so entertained when he talked to them. *I know he said he wouldn't have anymore kits, but he's so good with them that it'd be a shame not to*.

Turtlefoot watched nervously as the water continued to rise. By now it was a quarter of the way up the smaller twoleg den, and she shuddered as she imagined it reaching them. The kits would be swept away, and there were too many of them for only the three of them to save. *If the water gets any closer, I'll grab onto two of them. Spider and Daisystream can grab the others.*

They stayed up there all day, as the water rose to halfway up the smaller twoleg den. Daisystream fretted the whole time, flinching every time the water lapped up towards them. Her tail was wrapped around her kits protectively as she watched the water. Eventually it got dark, and the kits drifted off to sleep, quickly followed by Daisystream.

Turtlefoot's eyes were heavy, but she refused to let herself fall asleep with the danger of the water at their paws. Spider sat next to her, his eyes wide and alert. Eventually she decided they'd be safe with him on watch, and allowed herself to drift into a deep slumber. Her dreams were laced with images of her family being swept away in the water. She cried out as Ivysprout's head disappeared beneath the surface. Her breath caught as she saw Graystream follow her under. *No, I love him!*

Turtlefoot quickly dove under the surface and flailed around, trying to find any of her family members. Her paws hit fur, and she quickly hooked her claws in, trying to pull them to the surface. She grew confused as she felt someone's paw on her shoulder, shaking her.

Light filtered into her eyes as the shaking paw woke her out of her slumber. She realized she'd been dreaming, and it was the next morning. She blinked open her eyes to see Spider standing above her, his eyes filled with worry. "Are you okay? You started flailing in your sleep and then grabbed my pelt".

"Yes I'm sorry, I was dreaming". Turtlefoot's mind flashed back to seeing Graystream, and she realized how strongly she actually felt for him.

"Well look," Spider pointed his tail over the edge of the smaller twoleg den. "The water is gone".

"*Gone?*" Turtlefoot echoed in a shocked tone. "Completely?"

Spider nodded. "Yes, this happened last time as well. The flood is caused by snow melt, and as soon as that's all drained the water levels return to normal".

"Wow, so we can go home now?" Turtlefoot muttered, astounded at how quickly the excess water had disappeared.

"Yes, I suppose we can". Spider said, his face brightening.

Daisystream had already woken up and was grooming the kits thoroughly. She turned to Turtlefoot, a happy look in her eyes. "We're going to make it home today! The kits can finally meet their father".

Turtlefoot nodded happily. "I'll be glad to be back. I just hope the camp isn't too badly destroyed and everyone is safe".

The cats nodded in agreement, and they quickly scrambled down to the ground. The bigger kits walked while the rest were carried as they headed in the direction of Pineclan. They hadn't been walking for long before pine trees started to dot the land, and the birch trees began to disappear. Turtlefoot sighed happily, already feeling more at home. Soon she'd be able to see everyone she cared about, and tell a certain tom how she really felt.

# Chapter 24

Lavenderpaw blinked opened her eyes and blearily looked around the apprentices' den. She could tell it was still early from the pale light streaming in from outside, and all the other apprentices were still asleep besides Thymepaw, whose nest was empty. Her assessment was today and Lavenderpaw had heard her leave at the crack of dawn. *I hope it goes well.* Lavenderpaw sat up and stretched until her tail shivered, then settled down to groom herself.

Suddenly she froze as blackness closed in around her sight. *I'm going to have another vision*. Frantic yellow eyes appeared in front of her face and she gasped. *Something is wrong.* "Lavenderpaw!" Spider yowled.

"What's happening?" She mewed worriedly.

"I need you to listen to me". Spider continued urgently. Lavenderpaw's jaws gaped open as he told her that the river was flooding badly and that she needed to tell Lionstar to evacuate the camp.

"Okay I'll warn him, I hope you stay safe". She called as his yellow eyes began to disappear.

"Who were you talking to?" Firepaw yawned sleepily.

"Uh, nobody". Lavenderpaw mewed awkwardly. "I have to go".

She turned and raced out of the den, heading straight to the stump Lionstar had his den in. Skidding to a halt outside the entrance, she called inside. "Lionstar? Are you awake?"

"Of course, what do you need Lavenderpaw?" He called back, poking his fiery head through the lichen covering the den entrance.

"I..." She paused. Would he even believe her? She shook herself. I have to at least try. "I had another vision. Spider said that the river

is flooding and we need to evacuate the camp immediately, or cats could die".

Lionstar's eyes widened, and Lavenderpaw swore she could see a hint of terror behind his green gaze. "Are you sure?" He mewed breathlessly.

Lavenderpaw nodded. "Yes, I trust Spider. If he says we need to evacuate, we need to evacuate".

Lionstar hesitated, then nodded his head. "Okay, we'll evacuate. I don't want a repeat of what happened to Darkstar. I'll call a clan meeting quickly and send someone out to warn the patrols".

Relieved that Lionstar had believed her, she backed up to give him room as he jumped on top of the stump. "May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Great Stump for a clan meeting".

Bleary eyed cats began emerging from the surrounding dens. Poppyfoot looked up from the fresh kill pile, where'd she'd been eating a mouse. She had probably already been awake to assign and organize morning patrols. Lavenderpaw spotted Starlingwing and the kits coming out of the nursery, and she rushed to meet them.

"Lavenderpaw?" The tabby queen mewed in confusion. "What's going on?"

The silver apprentice quickly told her mother what she had seen, and Starlingwing gasped. "We'd better hurry, the last flood was devastating for our clan".

Lavenderpaw nodded. "Lionstar is giving the evacuation order now".

"You all know that Lavenderpaw joined our clan moons ago as a loner kit. But what you don't know is that, when she first arrived, our medicine cat apprentice Strikepaw received a notice from Starclan that she had a great destiny here. She was destined to save Pineclan, and we didn't understand how". The gathered clan cats gasped, and Lavenderpaw shrunk beneath her pelt as they all turned to stare at her.

Lionstar raised his tail for silence, then continued. "Then, she started having visions of a cat named Spider, who she could speak directly to. We initially tried to stop these visions, but then multiple cats had dreams from Starclan that she should continue communicating with him. So we have allowed her to, without knowing why until now. She received a vision from Spider around sunrise that the river is flooding, so I am giving the order to evacuate the camp and move to higher ground. We will all relocate to the gathering clearing immediately".

As he finished speaking, the clan erupted into yowls. "How do you know we can trust this *Spider*?" Blazethroat called. "How do you know we can trust *Lavenderpaw*?" Alderbush, her mentor, growled, sending her a pointed glare. *Yikes, so he still doesn't like me*.

Lavenderpaw's mind briefly floated to her training sessions since becoming an apprentice. They had mostly been made up of Alderbush telling her she was doing everything wrong, and then him giving up for the day and leaving in exasperation. Still, Lavenderpaw felt like she'd been coming along well with her hunting and fighting. She could almost beat Firepaw now, and had been able to beat Acornpaw for awhile now.

She snapped back to the present as the yowls around her got louder. Clearly frustrated, Lionstar raised his voice above everyone else. "Silence! I am not asking for your opinions on the matter. I am trusting Lavenderpaw, and we are evacuating. That's that". Many cats didn't look happy about his decision, but nobody else said anything.

"Now," Lionstar continued. "Poppyfoot is going to be splitting cats into groups, and appointing a leader of each group to make sure everyone stays together and gets to the clearing safely".

Poppyfoot hopped up onto the stump beside the leader. Her black and silver fur rippled uneasily as she addressed the gathered cats. "I know this is scary for all of you given the outcome of the last flood, but we must remain calm and listen to Lionstar".

The clan cats nodded, some grudgingly, and Poppyfoot continued. "The first group will be made up of Junipertwig, Strikepaw,

Sprucesky, Mousenose, Rowanroot, Applestem, Soilclaw, Treesting, and Vinetooth. Mousenose will be leading the group. Please ensure that the medicine cats get to the clearing unharmed".

The brown tabby tom nodded, his brown eyes earnest. "Of course".

Poppyfoot nodded. "You may lead your group to the clearing now".

The small group of cats turned and slipped through the log tunnel with Mousenose in the lead. Poppyfoot turned to the remaining cats and named another group. "Starlingwing, Midnightfur, Shadowkit, Slykit, Gladekit, Amberpelt, Hornetheart, Olivepatch, Frogclaw, and Sprigleap. Midnightfur will be leading". *I'm not in their group?* Lavenderpaw wondered in confusion as she watched her family leave.

"Swanfur, Minkpaw, Stormpaw, Heatherpaw, Puddlestripe, Heronlight, Ivysprout, Jayflight, Elkgust, and Sunwhisker. Sunwhisker will be leading, please evacuate to the clearing". Sunwhisker nodded and led his group out. "Plumeyes, Firepaw, Shinepaw, Acornpaw, Finchpaw, Cloudrun, Sootdrift, Squirreltree, Russettail, and Graystream. Russettail will be leading, follow the other groups".

Next Poppyfoot chose the elders, Spikefall, Owlsneeze, Needlenose, and Archtooth, to be escorted by some of the younger warriors, Leafstorm, Spoteye, Dustsnout, and Stumpleap. Two more experienced warriors, Bubblenose and Astertuft, joined them, with Astertuft in the lead.

"I need a patrol to go find Splashpelt and Thymepaw. Her assessment was today and they're still out in the forest. Fawnface, Dovefeather, Beetleleg, Blazethroat, Wavewash, and Burnttail, I need you to go search for them. Wavewash will lead. Once you find them, go straight to the clearing". Poppyfoot instructed.

The cats nodded, and Lavenderpaw noticed that Burnttail looked particularly worried. She quickly remembered that the brown and black she-cat was Thymepaw's mother. *She must be so worried about her*. Lavenderpaw's heart squeezed with pity as Burnttail's hazel eyes flashed with concern as she slipped through the log tunnel.

After they had left, Lionstar stepped up to the front of the log. "Everyone else, Poppyfoot, Alderbush, Goldencurl, Lightstep, Lilyfoot, and Lavenderpaw, are with me. Let's head out". *Why* me*?*

As they exited the camp, Lavenderpaw hurried to walk beside Lionstar. She dipped her head respectfully before speaking to him. "Lionstar, why did you choose me to stay with you instead of going with my family?"

"Well, you have a connection with Spider. I need you with me in case he sends any updates on the flood". He explained gently. "Don't worry, you'll see your family at the clearing".

Just as he finished speaking, the ground began to shake, growing stronger by the second. *Oh no, the flood is close*. Lavenderpaw thought with terror. "*Run!*" Lionstar yowled, shoving her in front of him.

Lavenderpaw froze for a moment before she willed her feet to move, racing through the forest. She ducked under branches and swerved around bushes, her feet barely touching the ground as she ran. Her ears swiveled back to hear if any other members of the patrol were behind her, and relief washed her pelt as she heard thundering paws on the forest floor. Lavenderpaw ran until she could no longer hear the rumbling sounds, then slowed to a halt, her sides rapidly rising and falling as she struggled to catch her breath.

Goldencurl skidded to a stop beside her, panting heavily, with Lilyfoot and Lightstep behind her. "We should keep moving, even if they flood doesn't seem close it could catch up quickly". The golden she-cat huffed, her amber eyes wide with fear.

"Wait, where are Lionstar, Poppyfoot, and Alderbush?" Lavenderpaw asked, her breath catching in her throat.

Lightstep shook her reddish brown head. "We can't wait for them, they went back to warn the patrol out searching for Splashpelt and Thymepaw".

"But the flood will hit them!" Lavenderpaw protested as the she-cat

began to nudge her forward.

"That's the duty of a leader and their deputy". Goldencurl murmured solemnly, though her voice wavered slightly.

*Right, Lionstar is her mate and Lilyfoot and Lightstep are their kits. She must be terrified of losing him right now*, Lavenderpaw thought sympathetically. Allowing herself to be guided by the older cats, Lavenderpaw's thoughts wandered back to Spider. Had he been able to escape the flood? It was odd, he was a stranger, but she felt like he was very important to her somehow.

She was drawn out of her thoughts as she heard hushed murmuring from up ahead. It got louder and louder until Lavenderpaw could spot pelts through the undergrowth. As they rounded a bramble bush, the gathering clearing came into view, and Lavenderpaw gasped at its beauty. The stream, the waterfall, the lush newleaf growth, everything was breathtaking.

Spotting Midnightfur's black pelt shining in the midday sunlight, Lavenderpaw rushed towards him, not waiting for the other cats with her. She leapt over the skinny stream and barreled into her father's side. "Midnightfur!"

He turned, his green eyes flashing in delight, and began purring. "Lavenderpaw! I'm so glad you made it safely. Come, Starlingwing has been worried sick about you".

Lavenderpaw eagerly followed him as she led her through the clearing. Most of their clanmates were there, except for the ones searching for Splashpelt and Thymepaw. They found Starlingwing wrapped around the younger kits, her brother Mousenose comfortingly stroking her side with his tail.

"Mother!" Lavenderpaw called excitedly.

The tabby queen's eyes widened and she shot to her paws, her brown eyes brimming with emotion as she raced towards her. "Oh Lavenderpaw, I was worried sick! I can't believe Lionstar made you go with him instead of us". She huffed.

"He wanted me with him in case I got any flood updates from Spider". Lavenderpaw explained quietly.

"Still, you're only an apprentice, that is too great a pressure to put on you. But it's over now, you're safe here with me". Starlingwing sighed, guiding Lavenderpaw back to the other kits.

"Hi Lavenderpaw!" Slykit squeaked, brushing his muzzle against her's.

The other two kits eagerly crowded in to say hello as well, and Lavenderpaw purred. She was lucky to have such a good family. She had just laid down to play with her siblings when she heard a commotion at the edge of the clearing. Standing up to see over the other cats, Lavenderpaw spotted a soaked patrol making their way to the clearing.

Lionstar was in the lead, with Poppyfoot leaning heavily on his shoulder. Thymepaw and Dovefeather followed, the two she-cats holding Splashpelt up between them. The black and white she-cat looked unconscious, her gray eyes rolled back in her head. Fawnface limped behind them, and Alderbush brought up the rear, his wet brown coat clinging to his frame.

"Fawnface!" Heronlight yowled, racing to her sister's side. "Are you alright?"

Soilclaw and Puddlestripe then appeared next to the group, taking their sister's weight from Thymepaw and Dovefeather. The two toms quickly carried her over to Junipertwig, who was waiting with the bundles of herbs she'd managed to take while evacuating. Lavenderpaw watched as the medicine cat instructed the toms to lay on either side of Splashpelt to warm her up.

Her attention was drawn back to the group when Spikefall the elder hobbled his way over to his daughter, Dovefeather. He began cleaning her wet fur, and pressed against her to help with warmth. "Where's Wavewash?" the brown and white tom asked gently.

Dovefeather shook her head, sorrow brimming in her blue eyes. "I'm sorry, I couldn't save him". She moaned, collapsing on the ground.

Spikefall's face crumbled, and he sank down next to the blue gray she-cat. He didn't say anything, but began licking Dovefeather's coat again, moving in long, comforting strokes. Lavenderpaw watched them grieve in horror. *The flood killed someone? Did I not warn them in time? This is my fault.*

Heronlight, who had been comforting Fawnface, spotted Poppyfoot and raced to her kit's side. "Poppyfoot, are you alright? Where Beetleleg?"

All Poppyfoot could do was shake her head, and Lavenderpaw's silver fur stood on end as Heronlight let out a low, grief filled moan. Lavenderpaw's legs went numb. *Another cat died.* Then the apprentice spotted Thymepaw's horrified face, and Lavenderpaw realized she hadn't seen Burntail, Thymepaw's mother, return. *And another.*

Next Lavenderpaw spotted Goldencurl speaking urgently with Lionstar. She appeared to ask a question, and Lionstar gave a little shake of his head. Goldencurl sat down in shock, then raised her head in a yowl. "Blazethroat, no!"

*How many cats died because I didn't warn the clan in time? Four now?* Lavenderpaw swayed on her feet, sickening guilt filling every inch of her body. Her mind was fading to blackness when a gentle tail tap on her shoulder snapped her out of it. She looked up, her vision blurry, and was surprised to see Alderbush standing in front of her.

"A-Alderbush?" She muttered in confusion.

For once, the usually gruff tom's face was gentle, his eyes soft with sympathy. "Many more cats would've died if you hadn't warned us, Lavenderpaw". He murmured quietly as if reading her thoughts. "Don't blame yourself for the ones we couldn't save; you saved the whole clan".

Lavenderpaw's eyes shot up in surprise, warmth quickly spreading throughout her pelt. She blinked gratefully at her mentor, relieved to have him on her side now. "Thank you".

# Chapter 25

Daisystream yawned as they padded next to the stream, their paws squelching in the ground which was still soaked from the flood. She could feel Fernkit's claws digging into her shoulders as she rode on her back, and Daisystream flinched in discomfort. *Kit claws may be tiny, but they sure are sharp.*

The sky above them had turned a deep indigo blue, and Daisystream could tell that nightfall wasn't far off. Still, she could tell they were getting close to Pineclan territory and would be home before long. The pine tree grew denser here, and the birch trees had stopped completely. The scent of pine needles filled her nose, and she sighed contently. *Home.* Her contentment ebbed as she realized that the land around them had been badly damaged by the flood, and her pelt prickled with worry. *Is the camp okay?*

Suddenly the scents of Pineclan washed over her, and Daisystream could tell they had reached the scent markers. "We're almost there!" She yowled excitedly.

"Finally!" Turtlefoot mewed, echoing her excitement. The tortoiseshell she-cat looked exhausted, with Treekit and Echokit sitting on her back weighing her down. "I'm ready to get these kits off my back". She mewed teasingly.

"Hey!" Treekit squeaked indignantly. "We are light as a feather!"

Spider purred in amusement. "I have to agree with Turtlefoot, my back is aching!" He groaned dramatically.

Silverkit and Thawkit, who sat on Spider's back, both let out shrill mews of protest. Mothkit walked next to them with his head high, clearly proud that he didn't have to be carried. Daisystream shook her head and let out a laugh. This journey had certainly been

exhausting and she had missed her clan, but she wouldn't change it for the world. She loved all of her kits fiercely, biological or not.

"We're almost to the camp!" Turtlefoot mewed excitedly, picking up her pace.

Daisystream hurried after her, worry worming its way beneath her pelt as she saw that the damage extended all throughout their territory. As the rounded a holly bush, Daisystream's eyes flew to where the log tunnel should be. Instead, a gaping hole in the camp wall had replaced it. Many of the bramble bushes surrounding the camp had been torn up, and Daisystream could clearly see the entire camp. The dens had been mostly washed away, but the stump where clan meetings were held still stood strong. *At least that survived.*

The camp was deserted to Daisystream's relief. "It looks like everyone made it out at least".

Turtlefoot nodded, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I just can't believe the whole camp is destroyed".

Spider shook his head. "Not completely. The holes in the wall can be patched and dens can be rebuilt. It'll be back to normal in a moon with a little hard work".

Daisystream touched her nose to his shoulder gratefully. His optimism always made situations seem a little brighter. "Well, I suppose we should go look for everybody else. Where do you think they went?" She wondered aloud.

"During the last flood the clan stayed at the gathering clearing because it's on higher ground than any of Pineclan territory. We should look there first".

Daisystream nodded in agreement, and their little group set off once again. They hadn't been trekking for long when they heard a rustle in the bushes. Turtlefoot, who was in the lead, held up her tail as a warning, and the group came to a halt. Lifting her head to try and scent who it was, Daisystream found her nose bogged down by the scents of the damp forest.

Suddenly a white and ginger pelt flashed in front of them. Daisystream stumbled backwards and gasped as she recognized Rowanroot. The tom faced them, eyes blazing. "Stop-". He froze, recognition entering his eyes. "Turtlefoot? Daisystream?"

*This must be awkward.* Daisystream thought, her eyes darting back and forth between the estranged mates. "Uh hi, Rowanroot. Long time no see!" Daisystream mewed, trying to sound positive.

The tom didn't seem to hear her as he stared at Turtlefoot, his gaze then drifting to Mothkit. "Is this why you disappeared?" He whispered quietly.

*Oh no, he suspects Mothkit is his! They do look exactly the same, so I'm not surprised.* Daisystream cleared her throat, quickly covering Mothkit. "No, actually these are all mine and Stumpleap's kits".

Doubt crept into Rowanroot's eyes, but he quickly shook his head, lifting it up high. "Oh, well congratulations! Where'd you disappear to though? You've been missing for moons! The whole clan has been searching for you frantically".

"We got captured by twolegs". Turtlefoot quickly mewed. "We escaped, but it took us awhile to find our way back. We had to wait until the kits were big enough to travel, and then the flood happened!"

"It's a long story, we'll explain everything to Lionstar when we get back to the clan. Where is everyone?" Daisystream wondered.

"They're all at the gathering clearing. Come, I'll show you. Everyone will be so happy to see you and meet the kits!" Rowanroot was about to lead them away when he seemed to notice Spider for the first time. "Who is that?"

"I'm Spider". The black tom mewed. "I was the one who warned Lavenderpaw about the flood".

Rowanroot stared at him skeptically. "Well I'm sure our leader will be happy to speak with you as well". With that, the ginger and white tom turned and led the group through the forest.

Eventually they came to the gathering area, and carefully made their way across the streams surrounding the clearing. Nobody had noticed them yet, and Daisystream realized many cats were collapsed around the clearing as if they were grieving. *Oh no! Did we lose some cats in the flood?*

Suddenly Daisystream heard an excited screech from across the clearing. "Turtlefoot!"

She turned to see Turtlefoot's sister, Ivysprout, streaking across the clearing. Her tortoiseshell pelt was a blur as she raced to reach her sister's side. Turtlefoot's gray eyes lit up, and she set Echokit and Treekit down quickly. "Ivysprout!" She ran to meet her sister, and they collided in a tangle of tortoiseshell fur. They wound around each other, purring as if they couldn't contain themselves.

The rest of Turtlefoot's kin surrounded her happily. Daisystream searched for her family, and felt her heart begin to race as she spotted Stumpleap across the clearing. Their eyes locked, and her mate's blue eyes widened in shock. He was beside her in a flash, and she felt overwhelmed with love as she nuzzled against him.

"I thought I'd never see you again". He murmured, his voice thick with emotion. "Are these our kits?" He asked incredulously.

Daisystream nodded, gathering the six little ones close to her with her tail. "Kits, this is your father, Stumpleap".

"Wow, I can't believe we finally get to meet our father!" Treekit squeaked happily. "I look just like you!"

Stumpleap purred. "Yes you do!"

Daisystream beamed at her mate. "Let me introduce everyone! This is Treekit". She mewed, tapping the little black tom. "This is Echokit", nodding to the white and brown she-kit. "And Mothkit and Fernkit look like they took after your father, Bubblenose! Thawkit here looks like a mix of me and you". She purred happily. "And Silverkit has a bit of Poppyfoot in him". She flinched internally as she lied about where the kits got their looks from, but she had no choice.

Daisystream and Stumpleap's kin soon flooded around them, excitedly greeting the kits, who were eating up all of the attention. Daisystream's sister, Swanfur, played happily with Fernkit and Echokit, while Mothkit and Elkgust wrestled playfully. Silverkit and Poppyfoot were comparing their pelt colors, and Treekit and Thawkit were telling anyone who would listen about their journey.

"You must be Spider". Lionstar's deep mew rang across the clearing, breaking up the family reunions momentarily. The dark red tom strode across the clearing, stopping in front of the black tom. Lavenderpaw hung behind him, looking nervous.

"Yes sir, I am". Spider stood tall, his head high as he respectfully addressed the leader.

"Well, from everyone in Pineclan, thank you for saving our clan from the flood. If it hadn't been for your warning, many more cats would've died. Sadly, we still lost Beetleleg, Blazethroat, Wavewash, and Burnttail". Daisystream gasped. *I can't believe the flood took so many lives!* "But without you we would've lost more, so thank you". Lionstar continued.

Spider shook his head. "All I did was warn Lavenderpaw. She's the real hero for telling you as quickly as she could and convincing you to evacuate".

"Still, you helped our clan greatly. Lavenderpaw has been wanting to thank you as well, for helping her fulfill her destiny". Lionstar stepped aside and ushered the young apprentice forward.

As she approached Spider, the black tom's eyes widened in amazement. "I know you". He whispered quietly.

Lavenderpaw's eyes widened as well, and her paws seemed to freeze. "Father". She breathed out.

"Wait, father?" Daisystream mewed incredulously. *How is that possible? I thought Spider's only kit died.*

"I thought you and Silver were dead. Another cat told me you two had been hit by a monster. I tried to find you, but never could, so I

assumed the monster had killed you". Spider murmured, burying his muzzle into Lavenderpaw's scruff.

"I remember everything now". Lavenderpaw gasped, eyes widening as if her memories were all suddenly rushing back. "Mother did get hit by the monster, but she threw me to the other side of the thunderpath before it got her. She injured her leg really badly, and said we needed to find the clans so their healer could fix her, or she'd get an infection and die. We were almost there, when a fox attacked us. The next thing I remember is waking up in Pineclan and them telling me mother had been killed by the fox".

"So Silver *is* dead". Spider murmured, hanging his head sadly. "But at least I have you, my kit. Who took care of you here?"

"I did". Starlingwing mewed, stepping up to stand beside her adopted kit. Midnightfur joined her, looking sullen at the idea of losing his kit. *Wow, this must be so crushing for them. They think they're going to lose their kit to her real father.*

"Starlingwing and Midnightfur, they adopted me when I entered the clan. I was raised with their kits, who are a few moons younger than me". Lavenderpaw mewed awkwardly.

Spider approached them, eyes glistening with appreciation. "Thank you for making her feel loved and included when she had lost everything. I know this might be a confusing situation, but we can all be her family. We'll make it work".

Midnightfur and Starlingwing's shoulders' sagged with relief, and they thanked Spider profusely. Daisystream sighed happily, glad to see that everything had been resolved. Families were reuniting, and her and her kits were finally home. It wasn't the camp she was used to, but home was wherever her clan was.

She was just beginning to relax when she spotted something across the clearing that made her fur stand on end. Rowanroot and Ivysprout were sharing tongues, looking much too close for comfort. She turned to Stumpleap questioningly, and her mate shook his head in distaste. "Almost the minute Turtlefoot went missing those two started getting close. I think they're officially mates now". He

explained.

"But him and Turtlefoot just ended things, and Ivysprout is her sister!" Daisystream mewed in protest.

"I know, it's not the best situation". Stumpleap murmured.

Only, making matters worse, Daisystream saw Turtlefoot staring at the two cats in horror. Her tail was bushed out in anger and her eyes were dark with fury. The tortoiseshell she-cat started towards them, her steps unsteady as she approached them. *Uh oh, this isn't going to be pretty.*

# Chapter 26

Turtlefoot's whole body seemed to freeze as she spotted Rowanroot and Ivysprout sharing tongues. *My sister? And my former mate? How is this possible?* Anger bubbled in her chest as she stared at the two across the clearing. She needed to say something, she had to confront them. Lifting her paw, she was about to storm over to them when she spotted a gray pelt heading towards her. She turned to see who it was, and found herself staring into captivating green eyes. *Graystream.* All of her anger seemed to melt away, and her heart began to quicken.

"Turtlefoot, I'm so glad you're back! I was worried sick, I thought the fox got you or something. I didn't know if I'd ever see you again". He murmured quietly, hanging his head.

Turtlefoot purred, love replacing the anger in her chest. "Well I'm here now. We got captured by some twolegs, but managed to escape and finally found our way back".

"I'm so glad you were able to escape, I can't imagine how scared you must've been". Graystream rubbed his cheek against hers, and she sank into him, drinking in his scent.

"Graystream," Turtlefoot breathed quietly. "Can we talk about-"

Just as she was about to confess her feelings, she was interrupted by Lionstar's booming voice behind her. "Well Turtlefoot, Daisystream. How about you tell me what happened and why you disappeared now".

Turtlefoot turned to face their leader, noticing that his eyes were furrowed with concern. *What is he so apprehensive about?* "Yes Lionstar, we'd be happy to explain everything".

Daisystream nodded, turning to the kits. "Can you stay with your

father while I talk to Lionstar?"

The kits nodded, and Stumpleap beamed down at the kits lovingly. *Those kits are going to grow up so loved, much more love than I ever could've given them.* Shaking her head, Turtlefoot followed Daisystream and Lionstar across the clearing to where Poppyfoot sat. The black and silver she-cat looked up as they approached, and Turtlefoot saw her eyes swimming with emotion. *Right, her brother Beetleleg died in the flood. She must be devastated.*

Poppyfoot cleared her throat and straightened up, trying to look positive. "Turtlefoot, Daisystream, we're elated to have you back in the clan".

The two she-cats dipped their heads respectfully to the deputy. "We were very sorry to hear about Beetleleg, he was a brave warrior". Turtlefoot murmured sympathetically.

Poppyfoot hung her head. "Yes, he was. Thank you for your condolences". The deputy shook her head, straightening up once more. "So, tell us everything that happened.

So Turtlefoot recounted the story her and Daisystream had rehearsed. They had been delivering herbs to Mapleclan and passed through the twoleg clearing. While there, a group of twolegs captured them and put them in the belly of a monster. They encountered Petalface in the monster, and she told them that she had been captured as well. They were taken to a twoleg den, where they managed to escape through a hole in the den wall. By then, Daisystream and Petalface had been too far along in their pregnancies to travel and it was the middle of leafbare, so they decided to stay in a makeshift den in the forest. That's where they met Spider, who helped Daisystream kit. Before Petalface kitted, she was recaptured by the twolegs, who had been searching for them. They hadn't been able to save her, and lost track of where she was. They searched for her, but when the kits were old enough to travel, they gave up and decided to come back to Pineclan. That's when the flood events occurred, and then they finally made it back to the clan.

"Great Starclan, that's a crazy story. I'm so glad you two were able

to escape and keep the kits safe". Poppyfoot mewed, her jaw agape.

Lionstar's gaze was dark as he asked, "so Petalface and her kits never escaped the twolegs?"

*Of course, that's why he looked so apprehensive about knowing our story. He wanted to know what happened to Petalface and his kits.* "No, they didn't. We never even saw the kits, she was recaptured before she even kitted. We tried so hard to find them, but there was no trace".

"Well maybe we should send out a patrol to look for them". Lionstar mewed urgently.

Poppyfoot shot him a quizzical look. "Why would we send a patrol? We should contact Mapleclan and let them decide how they want to handle the situation. After all, she was from their clan".

Lionstar cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. "Oh, of course. Good idea, I'll send a patrol to Mapleclan soon".

Turtlefoot shot Daisystream a knowing look. *He may have told her he didn't want anything to do with her or their kits, but he still loves her deep down.* Daisystream returned her look, shifting her paws awkwardly at the secret they knew. Before anything more awkward could happen, Junipertwig approached the group. "Sorry to interrupt, but I need inspect them for any injuries. Especially Daisystream, she just kitted three moons ago and then had a long travel afterwards".

Lionstar nodded. "Of course, I think we learned all about why they disappeared that we needed to". With that their leader and deputy strode away, and Junipertwig sniffed each of them over thoroughly.

"Well, you're both physically healthy". She mewed with satisfaction. Just then Strikepaw approached them, looking relieved at their return.

"Can you tell us all about it? I mean, the real story?" He mewed quietly.

Turtlefoot nodded. "Of course".

So her and Daisystream told them what had actually happened. When they got to the part about Birchkit, Turtlefoot took a deep breath. "I had three kits. Mothkit and Silverkit, who are over there with Stumpleap. But also a third kit, a little tortoiseshell she-kit named Birchkit. She looked just like me, and joined Starclan at only a few days old".

"I'm sorry to hear that". Junipertwig murmured.

Daisystream trembled. "I had three kits too". She whispered. "Treekit, Thawkit, and Chasmkit. Chasmkit was a little black tom. I kitted too early and thought I was going to lose all of them, but I only lost Chasmkit to Starclan".

They then told the medicine cats about Lionstar and Petalface's shock affair, and how she had left Mapleclan to become a kittypet. "Fernkit and Echokit are Petalface's. She gave them up because she heard twolegs would give them away if she kept them. Do you think it's obvious how much Fernkit looks like Lionstar?" Turtlefoot whispered worriedly.

Strikepaw looked at the she-kit across the clearing thoughtfully. "She does look an awful lot like him, but nobody suspected that Lionstar had another mate in Mapleclan. To their knowledge, his only mate is Goldencurl and his only kits are Lightstep and Lilyfoot".

"Yes, but I'm concerned about how much Mothkit resembles Rowanroot. Do you think he'll figure it out?" Junipertwig mewed in concern.

"Rowanroot did ask about Mothkit when we first returned, but seemed to accept my explanation that he was Daisystream's kit. Besides, Stumpleap's father has a ginger pelt. Mothkit could've easily gotten it from him". Daisystream mewed reassuringly.

"He seems to be too preoccupied with my sister at the moment". Turtlefoot muttered.

Junipertwig squirmed uncomfortably. "Yes, that does seem to be a thing now. But that's okay, I seemed to have seen you and my

brother, Graystream, getting close before Lionstar pulled you away".

Turtlefoot's pelt flushed hot with embarrassment. "What? No way I-"

Junipertwig mrrowed with amusement. "Don't worry, I'm not judging. You two are cute together. Plus, he doesn't want kits either, so it's perfect".

Turtlefoot's eyes widened, and she felt happiness bubbling up in her stomach. "He doesn't? So that won't be an issue like it was with Rowanroot?"

Junipertwig shook her head. "Nope, won't be a problem at all".

"That's great for you, Turtlefoot!" Daisystream mewed encouragingly. "I'm happy you found a mate who wants the same things as you".

"Whoa we're not even mates yet! We haven't even told each other how we feel yet, I don't even know if he likes me!" Turtlefoot gasped, taking a step back.

"Well, I can see it coming soon". Junipertwig meowed teasingly.

"Me too". Daisystream joined in, flicking her jokingly with her tail.

"I am not going to be teased by you two, I'm leaving". Turtlefoot meowed. She was trying to sound serious, but struggled to hold back a purr of amusement as she walked away.

As she padded away, Graystream intercepted her once more. "I saw you talking to Junipertwig, is everything okay?" His green eyes were round with worry, and Turtlefoot's heart melted at how caring he was.

"Yes everything's fine, she was just checking me for any injuries from the trip. Looks like I'm alright". Turtlefoot purred.

"Good". Graystream breathed. "I'm overjoyed to have you back in my life".

"I'm happy to be back". Turtlefoot murmured, leaning against the

gray tom. Finally, after many moons of worry and struggle, she could finally see a silver lining.

# Chapter 27

Lavenderpaw stared at her father in wonder. All this time she'd known nothing about her life before Pineclan, but as soon as she saw Spider she remembered everything. Her cozy nest with Spider and Silver in the birch forest, the horrible monster accident with her mother, the journey to find the clans, the fox attack, everything. Suddenly all of the puzzle pieces had fallen into place, and it was like she knew who she was again. Her destiny to save the clan had also been fulfilled, and her whole life was open in front of her.

"So you're an apprentice?" Spider mewed questioningly. "Explain how that works".

"Well, apprentices are warriors in training. They have a mentor who teaches them everything they need to know about hunting, fighting, Starclan, and protecting their clan. Once the mentor and leader think the apprentice is ready, they have an assessment. If they pass, they become a warrior and receive their warrior name". Lavenderpaw explained as best she could.

"Who's your mentor?" Spider wondered allowed, looking around the clan cats.

Lavenderpaw searched the crowd, and finally spotted Alderbush among the cats. She pointed her tail at the brown tom. "That's Alderbush. He's Lionstar's brother. We didn't get along at all at first, but I think we're coming along now". Her heart seemed to glow as she remembered Alderbush's kind words after the flood. *Maybe he has a soft spot after all.*

"Well I'm glad to hear that". Spider mewed. "What's Starclan again?"

"They're the clans ancestors. They guide the clans through hard times and deliver messages to the medicine cats through visions. The clan lives in the stars". Lavenderpaw mewed slowly, still uncertain about Starclan as well.

"Right". Spider nodded. "All the clan stuff is still a little confusing to me. Do you think Lionstar will let me join?"

Lavenderpaw heard worry in his mew, and brushed against his black pelt reassuringly. "I'm sure he will. Why don't you ask him?"

Lionstar was sitting with a group of older warriors and Poppyfoot, their deputy. They seemed to be discussing something important, but when Lionstar glanced up and caught Lavenderpaw's eye, he beckoned her and Spider over.

"We were just discussing you two, actually". Lionstar meowed, dipping his head in greeting. "Spider, we'd be delighted to let you join the clan. If you want to, that is".

Spider's eyes lit up with delight, and he nodded his head. "I'd be honored to join Pineclan. After so many moons as a loner, it'll be nice to be surrounded by companions".

Lionstar nodded. "As long as you contribute to hunting, patrolling, and protecting Pineclan, we'd be happy to have you. Losing as many warriors as we did in the flood will be hard on the clan, so having an extra set of paws will be helpful. Especially since we have to rebuild the camp now".

"Of course". Spider meowed enthusiastically. "I'll do whatever it takes to help the clan".

Lionstar dipped his head gratefully, then stepped back and let out a yowl. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join here for a clan meeting".

The clan gathered around him, with many cats looking wet, battered, and grief stricken. Lionstar stared around at his clan and waited for everyone to get settled, then raised his head to speak. "I know this has been a very difficult day for all of us. Some of you have lots friends and kin, and our camp has been destroyed. We're all exhausted and beaten, but Pineclan will come back from this!" He yowled encouragingly, drawing enthusiastic calls from the gathered cats.

"To lighten the mood, I have two pieces of good news". Lionstar called, motioning for the cats to quiet down. "First, Spider will be joining our clan. Spider," The leader turned to the black tom, his red pelt glowing in the setting sun. "Do you wish to take a warrior name?"

Spider dipped his head. "I would love to".

"Then step forward, and we will conduct a true warrior ceremony". Lionstar rumbled. There were approving murmurs from the crowd as Spider stepped forward. "I, Lionstar, leader of Pineclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this cat. They helped save our clan from a great disaster, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn. Spider, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do". Spider mewed, and Lavenderpaw watched happily as her father's ceremony continued.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Spider, from this moment on you will be known as Spiderpelt. Starclan honors your bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Pineclan". Lionstar finished, resting his chin on Spiderpelt's head. "Now lick my shoulder". He instructed quietly, and Lavenderpaw giggled. *Spiderpelt has a lot to learn about clan life.*

"Spiderpelt! Spiderpelt!" The clan chanted, seemingly foregoing their wariness to loners and rogues for the moment.

Lionstar searched the clan for a moment, then locked eyes with Lavenderpaw's mentor. "Alderbush, Spiderpelt will be accompanying you and Lavenderpaw on training and hunting excursions. This way he can learn about clan ways without having to be trained as an apprentice".

Alderbush dipped his head. "Of course, Lionstar". *The flood really seems to have mellowed him out, for the time being,* Lavenderpaw thought in awe.

"As for the second piece of good news, Thymepaw, please step

forward". The black she-cat stepped forward, her hazel eyes stretched wide with surprise.

"Yes, Lionstar?" She mewed timidly. Lavenderpaw's face softened sympathetically. Thymepaw had always been a very shy and quiet cat, so being in front of the whole clan must have her completely on edge.

"You showed tremendous bravery during the flood. Even though it put your life at risk, you still went back into the water to rescue your mentor, Splashpelt. Because of that courage, she is alive and back with the clan. We've discussed it, and feel that you're ready to become a warrior". Lionstar mewed, nodding at the diffident she-cat encouragingly.

"Really? But I didn't get to finish my assessment. And I couldn't save my own mother..." Thymepaw whispered, her eyes welling with emotion. Lavenderpaw's heart felt like it shattered as she saw the sadness in her clanmate's hazel eyes. *Losing a parent is so hard...*

"Your actions during the flood proved you're worthy to be a warrior more than any assessment could have. As for Burnttail, I know her loss was very difficult, and the whole clan has felt it. But it was not your fault at all". Lionstar murmured comfortingly, draping his tail over the black she-cat's shoulders. "So, are you ready to become a warrior?"

Thymepaw nodded, her expression more optimistic than before. Lavenderpaw watched as Lionstar conducted yet another warrior ceremony. The whole clan cheered Thymepaw's new name, Thymeswoop, as the ceremony came to a close. *Lionstar always knows how to lift the clan's spirit. He may have made some mistakes,* Lavenderpaw's mind wandered to Petalface, *but he's still a good leader.*

The clan was dismissed, and Lavenderpaw padded over to where Starlingwing, Midnightfur, and Spiderpelt were getting to know each other. Gladekit, Slykit, and Shadowkit were tumbling around their paws, play wrestling with each other. "Hi everyone". Lavenderpaw mewed cheerily.

"Hi". Midnightfur greeted her. "We were just congratulating Spiderpelt on becoming a member of Pineclan".

Spiderpelt dipped his head in appreciation. "I'm happy to be here. I spent most of my life as a loner until I met Silver and we had Lavender. When I lost them, I felt like I'd be alone forever. Then I ended up helping Daisystream and Turtlefoot, and finally felt like I was a part of someting. Now I get to feel like that forever".

"I'm glad you're happy here". Lavenderpaw purred, rubbing her muzzle against Spiderpelt's.

"Should we hunt?" Midnightfur suggested. "I'm so hungry my belly thinks my throat's been claws out. Lionstar gave everyone permission to start building a freshkill pile, too".

Lavenderpaw nodded. "Yes good idea. A freshkill pile is a pile of prey the apprentices and warriors make. Queens, elders, and medicine cats take prey first, then everyone else is allowed to eat". She explained to Spiderpelt, who nodded in understanding.

Starlingwing stayed with the kits as Lavenderpaw joined Midnightfur and Spiderpelt hunting. They searched for prey in the undergrowth surrounding the clearing, and Lavenderpaw quickly caught a mouse. She lifted her head with pride at how quickly she'd been able to catch something. Spiderpelt soon emerged from the bushes carrying two squirrels, and Midnightfur had caught two mice and a sparrow.

"Prey sure is good in Newleaf". Midnightfur murmured around his mouthful of prey.

Lavenderpaw nodded in agreement, excitement coursing through her at the thought of showing off her catch to Alderbush. *He'll see that I can do something right after all and he'll have to be proud of me.* When they returned to the gathering clearing, she made sure to walk right past the brown tom, who was sharing tongues with Fawnface.

"Lavenderpaw, did you catch that all by yourself?" He called after her.

The silver apprentice turned to face her mentor. "I sure did!" She chirped happily.

Alderbush nodded in approval. "Just what I'd expect from my apprentice. Soon we'll work on the best squirrel catching techniques".

Lavenderpaw dipped her head gratefully, and walked to the freshkill pile with a hop in her step. *Finally, some approval from him.* She dropped her mouse on the already growing pile of prey and rejoined Starlingwing. Midnightfur and Spiderpelt joined her soon after, having dropped their catches on the pile as well. Midnightfur dropped a shrew in front of Starlingwing and licked her ear affectionately. "I know shrew is your favorite so I brought one from the pile".

"Can we try mother?" Slykit mewed pleadingly.

"Yes, can we?" Gladekit joined in.

Lavenderpaw purred in amusement, her heart throbbing with affection. Her family may be confusing and complicated, but she wouldn't change it for the world. She loved her siblings, her adopted parents, and her real father all so much. Even after the flood, she knew Pineclan was the place for her.